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Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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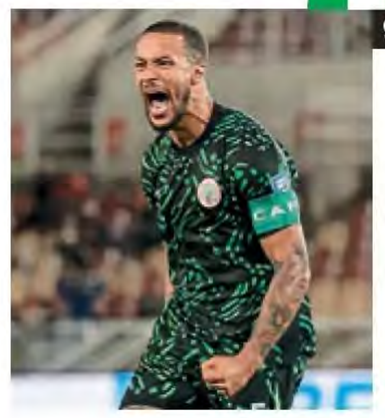

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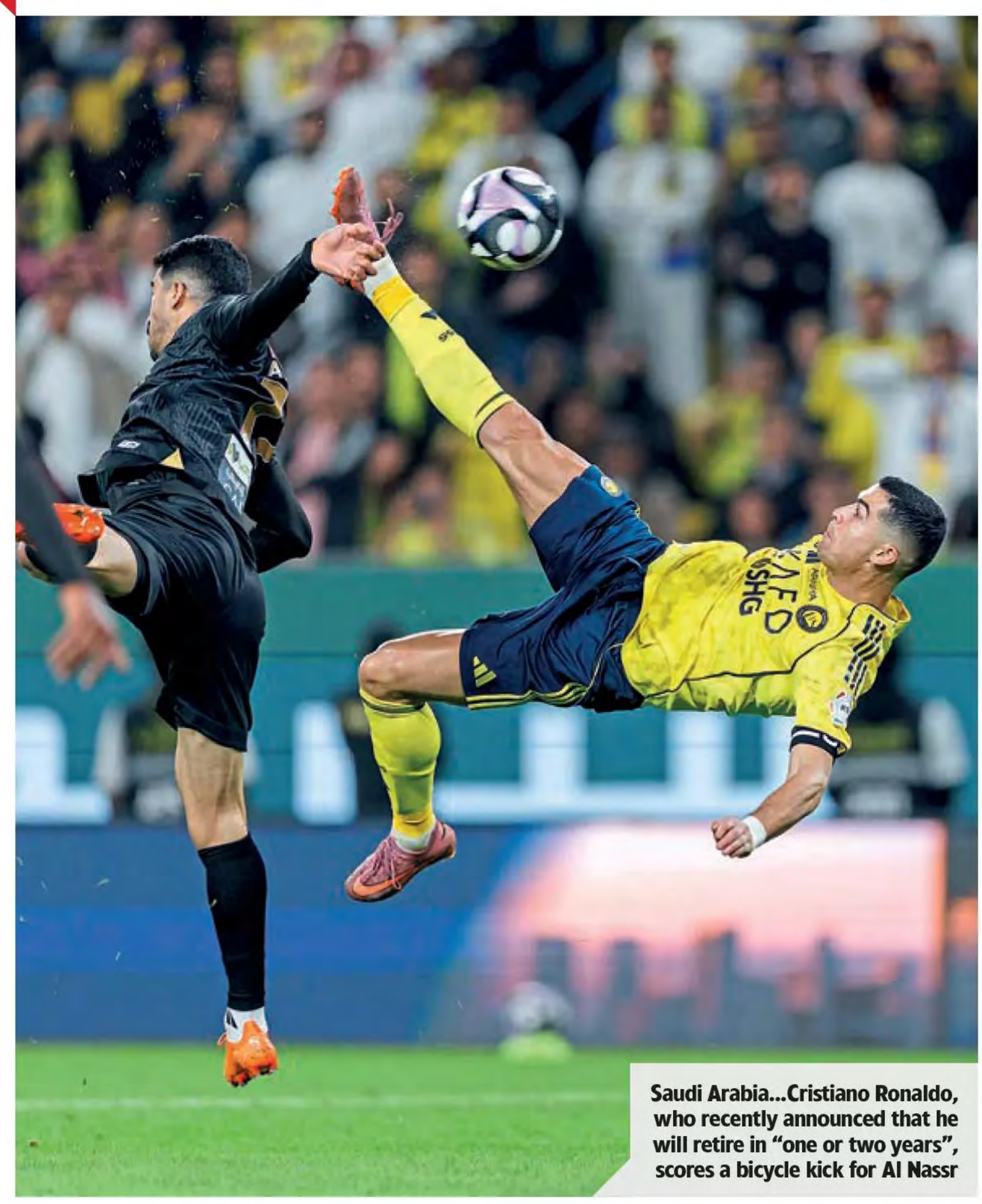

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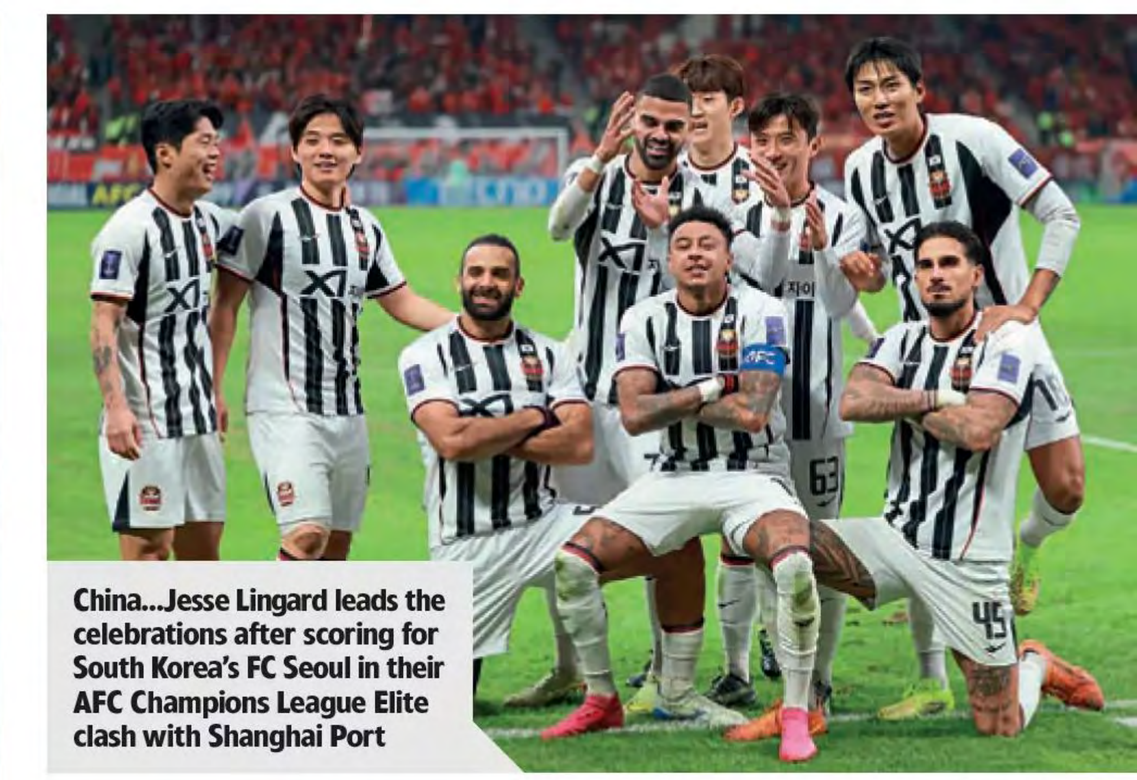

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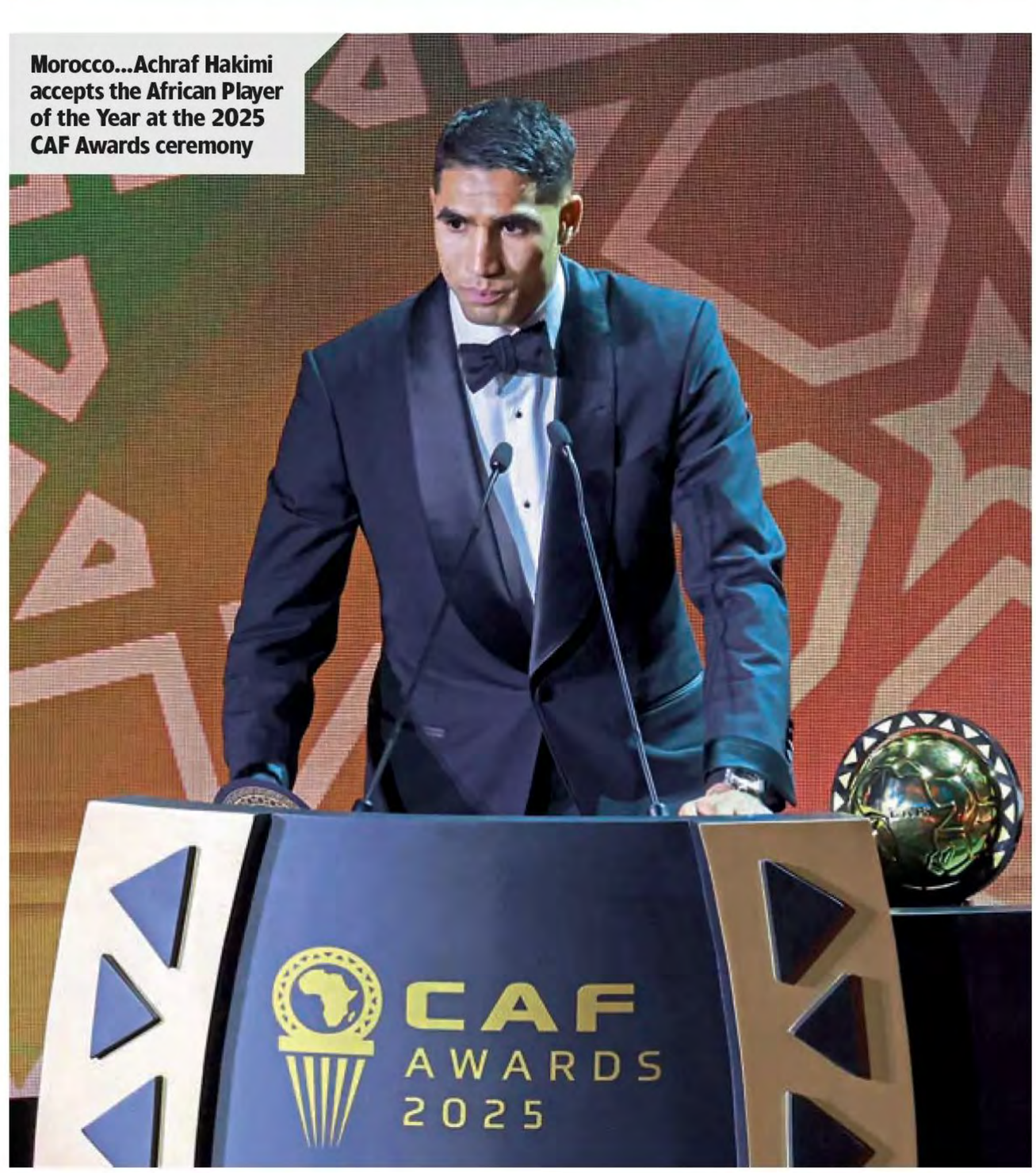

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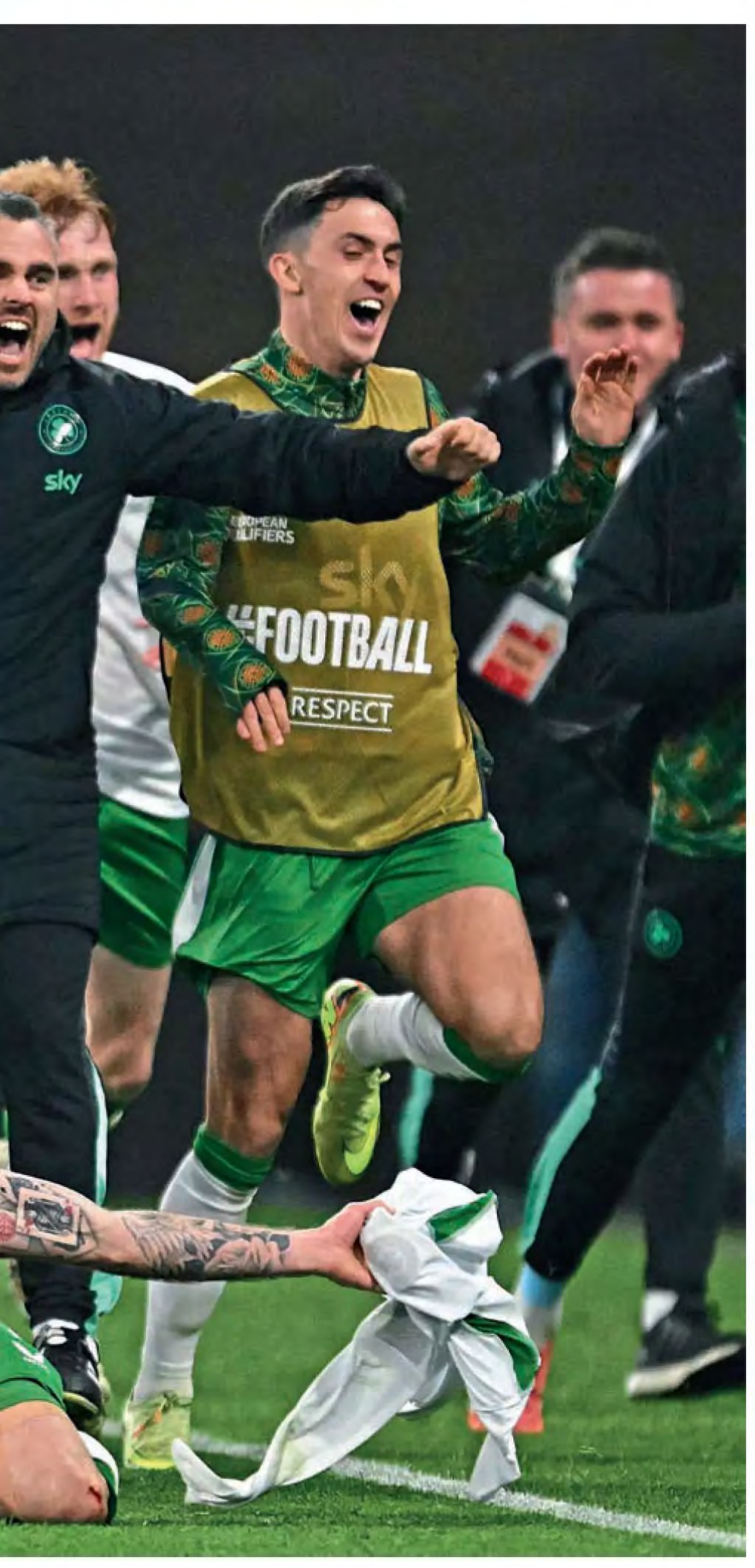

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WORLD CUP 2026 DRAW

SAMINDRA KUNTI REPORTS FROM WASHINGTON D.C.

World Cup draw turns into the Trump show

At the end of a dramatic afternoon at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the 42 finalists and play-off contenders finally knew their World Cup fate. After hundreds of qualifiers, the tournament came into view. It was also the moment that the three host nations presented themselves to a global audience.

Mexico's Claudia Sheinbaum and Canada's Mark Carney attended, even drew a ball, but the entire draw got a MAGA makeover – or rather, FIFA did everything possible to flatter US President Donald Trump. The line-up included Andrea Bocelli, who sang at the White House in October; NFL great Tom Brady and ice hockey legend Wayne Gretzky, guests in Trump's VIP suite at the Club World Cup final; and the Village People who closed the show with "YMCA", a song Trump embraced on the campaign trail.

Gianni Infantino had courted Trump all year, championing the US President, and the culmination was the awarding of FIFA's inaugural Peace Prize to him. The FIFA supremo said: "You can always count on my support." In response, the US President called the award "truly one of the great honours of my life."

The global news media, who queued for two hours in the freezing cold to get past a secret service checkpoint, were unsparing in their criticism. *The Guardian* asked: "Any chance of a VAR review?" And wrote that the prize award "had about as much drama and suspense as reading a dictionary." The *Daily Mirror* called it "a grim display of one man's political sycophancy."

Buoyed on stage, Infantino, not shy of hyperbole, said: "This will not just be the greatest football event, this will be the greatest event in human history."

But will it? To help boost revenue and develop the game globally, its mission statement, FIFA expanded the finals to 48 teams, potentially risking the quality on display. But at the same time, the draw still offered just about enough intrigue.

> FIFA expanded the finals to 48 teams, potentially risking the quality on display. But at the same time, the draw still offered just about enough intrigue

Front and centre... Donald Trump with the FIFA Peace Prize

France, 2018 champions and 2022 runners-up, find themselves in arguably the strongest group alongside Senegal, Norway and potentially Iraq. Senegal famously defeated *Les Bleus* 1-0 in the opening match of the 2002 World Cup and, in Boston, France will face the firepower of Erling Haaland, who propelled Norway in qualifying. "It's clear that Group I is one of the toughest, if not the toughest," reacted France head coach Didier Deschamps.

In Group J, defending champions Argentina will be pleased with Algeria, Austria and Jordan but will Messi, in the twilight of his career, still have the legs to lead them one last time?

Five-time champions Brazil open with a tricky Group C tie against 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco, while their final group game v Scotland will be a repeat of the opener of France '98.

England take on familiar foes Croatia and Panama, as well as Ghana. In 2018, Croatia stopped England from reaching their first World Cup final since 1966 and the pair met again during the Euro 2020 group stage.

In the last 16, England could play Mexico at the iconic Azteca Stadium, the venue of the Hand of God, and in the quarter-finals against Brazil in Miami. Manager Thomas Tuchel knows that the World Cup represents his litmus test: he was after all hired to win it. "It sounds like a pretty hard tournament," suggested Tuchel.

In Group H, Spain meet Uruguay, Saudi Arabia and Cape Verde, while Cristiano Ronaldo and Portugal play Colombia, Uzbekistan and the winner of inter-confederation play-off 1.

The US, Mexico and Canada all have favourable draws that should allow them to make the knockouts and provide those indelible moments that come to define tournaments for host nations. US boss Mauricio Pochettino said it's all about "improving" in those last months before the big kick-off.

Meanwhile, Mexico want to reach a first quarter-final since 1986. They kick-off the super-sized finals against South Africa, a repeat of the opener in 2010. That World Cup is remembered as Africa's first World Cup, even if the quality of play was underwhelming. The 2026 edition may well see a drop in quality, and, as the draw proved, be remembered with less affection.

Group Stage Draw & Fixtures

GROUP A

MEXICO • SOUTH AFRICA • SOUTH KOREA • TBC*

June 11	Mexico v South Africa	*(1pm, Mexico City)*
June 11	South Korea v TBC*	*(8pm, Guadalajara)*
June 18	TBC* v South Africa	*(12pm, Atlanta)*
June 18	Mexico v South Korea	*(7pm, Guadalajara)*
June 24	TBC* v Mexico	*(7pm, Mexico City)*
June 24	South Africa v South Korea	*(7pm, Monterrey)*

**UEFA Path D winner: Denmark, Czech Republic, Republic of Ireland or North Macedonia*

GROUP B

CANADA • TBC* • QATAR • SWITZERLAND

June 12	Canada v TBC*	*(3pm, Toronto)*
June 13	Qatar v Switzerland	*(12pm, San Fran. Bay Area)*
June 18	Switzerland v TBC*	*(12pm, Los Angeles)*
June 18	Canada v Qatar	*(3pm, Vancouver)*
June 24	Switzerland v Canada	*(12pm, Vancouver)*
June 24	TBC* v Qatar	*(12pm, Seattle)*

**UEFA Path A winner: Italy, Wales, Bosnia & Herzegovina or Northern Ireland*

GROUP C

BRAZIL • MOROCCO • HAITI • SCOTLAND

June 13	Brazil v Morocco	*(6pm, New York/New Jersey)*
June 13	Haiti v Scotland	*(9pm, Boston)*
June 19	Scotland v Morocco	*(6pm, Boston)*
June 19	Brazil v Haiti	*(9pm, Philadelphia)*
June 24	Scotland v Brazil	*(6pm, Miami)*
June 24	Morocco v Haiti	*(6pm, Atlanta)*

GROUP D

UNITED STATES • PARAGUAY • AUSTRALIA • TBC*

June 12	United States v Paraguay	*(6pm, Los Angeles)*
June 13	Australia v TBC*	*(9pm, Vancouver)*
June 19	United States v Australia	*(12pm, Seattle)*
June 19	TBC* v Paraguay	*(9pm, San Fran. Bay Area)*
June 25	TBC* v United States	*(7pm, Los Angeles)*
June 25	Paraguay v Australia	*(7pm, San Fran. Bay Area)*

**UEFA Path C winner: Turkey, Slovakia, Kosovo or Romania*

GROUP E

GERMANY • CURACAO • IVORY COAST • ECUADOR

June 14	Germany v Curacao	*(12pm, Houston)*
June 14	Ivory Coast v Ecuador	*(7pm, Philadelphia)*
June 20	Germany v Ivory Coast	*(4pm, Toronto)*
June 20	Ecuador v Curacao	*(7pm, Kansas City)*
June 25	Curacao v Ivory Coast	*(4pm, Philadelphia)*
June 25	Ecuador v Germany	*(4pm, New York/New Jersey)*

GROUP F

NETHERLANDS • JAPAN • TBC* • TUNISIA

June 14	Netherlands v Japan	*(3pm, Dallas)*
June 14	TBC* v Tunisia	*(8pm, Monterrey)*
June 20	Netherlands v TBC*	*(12pm, Houston)*
June 20	Tunisia v Japan	*(10pm, Monterrey)*
June 25	Japan v TBC*	*(6pm, Dallas)*
June 25	Tunisia v Netherlands	*(6pm, Kansas City)*

**UEFA Path B winner: Ukraine, Poland, Albania or Sweden*

GROUP G

BELGIUM • EGYPT • IRAN • NEW ZEALAND

June 15	Belgium v Egypt	*(12pm, Seattle)*
June 15	Iran v New Zealand	*(6pm, Los Angeles)*
June 21	Belgium v Iran	*(12pm, Los Angeles)*
June 21	New Zealand v Egypt	*(6pm, Vancouver)*
June 26	Egypt v Iran	*(8pm, Seattle)*
June 26	New Zealand v Belgium	*(8pm, Vancouver)*

GROUP H

SPAIN • CAPE VERDE • SAUDI ARABIA • URUGUAY

June 15	Spain v Cape Verde	*(12pm, Atlanta)*
June 15	Saudi Arabia v Uruguay	*(6pm, Miami)*
June 21	Spain v Saudi Arabia	*(12pm, Atlanta)*
June 21	Uruguay v Cape Verde	*(6pm, Miami)*
June 26	Cape Verde v Saudi Arabia	*(7pm, Houston)*
June 26	Uruguay v Spain	*(6pm, Guadalajara)*

GROUP I

FRANCE • SENEGAL • TBC* • NORWAY

June 16	France v Senegal	*(3pm, New York/New Jersey)*
June 16	TBC* v Norway	*(6pm, Boston)*
June 22	France v TBC*	*(5pm, Philadelphia)*
June 22	Norway v Senegal	*(8pm, New York/New Jersey)*
June 26	Norway v France	*(3pm, Boston)*
June 26	Senegal v TBC*	*(3pm, Toronto)*

**Inter-Confederation Play-Off Pathway 2 winner: Iraq, Bolivia or Suriname*

GROUP J

ARGENTINA • ALGERIA • AUSTRIA • JORDAN

June 16	Argentina v Algeria	*(8pm, Kansas City)*
June 16	Austria v Jordan	*(9pm, San Fran. Bay Area)*
June 22	Argentina v Austria	*(12pm, Dallas)*
June 22	Jordan v Algeria	*(8pm, San Fran. Bay Area)*
June 27	Algeria v Austria	*(9pm, Kansas City)*
June 27	Jordan v Argentina	*(9pm, Dallas)*

GROUP K

PORTUGAL • TBC* • UZBEKISTAN • COLOMBIA

June 17	Portugal v TBC*	*(12pm, Houston)*
June 17	Uzbekistan v Colombia	*(8pm, Mexico City)*
June 23	Portugal v Uzbekistan	*(12pm, Houston)*
June 23	Colombia v TBC*	*(8pm, Guadalajara)*
June 27	Colombia v Portugal	*(7.30pm, Miami)*
June 27	TBC* v Uzbekistan	*(7.30pm, Atlanta)*

**Inter-Confederation Play-Off Pathway 1 winner: DR Congo, Jamaica or New Caledonia*

GROUP L

ENGLAND • CROATIA • GHANA • PANAMA

June 17	England v Croatia	*(3pm, Dallas)*
June 17	Ghana v Panama	*(7pm, Toronto)*
June 23	England v Ghana	*(4pm, Boston)*
June 23	Panama v Croatia	*(7pm, Toronto)*
June 27	Panama v England	*(5pm, New York/New Jersey)*
June 27	Croatia v Ghana	*(5pm, Philadelphia)*

● *all kick-off times are local time and subject to change*

Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

World Cup countdown begins

World Cup angst is nothing new, but concerns over the 2026 finals look set to linger

See you at the World Cup...the 2026 finals are on the horizon

Welcome to 2026 and the World Cup that will cost many fans the earth to attend, all overseen by FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

Build-ups to World Cups are frequently fraught with fear. Take the past 20 years. The 2006 tournament opened to screaming headlines about English hooligans running riot through the Ruhr and ruining the event, but banning orders and Germany's intelligent policing contributed to a peaceful World Cup.

Ills before the thrills: that's the standard rhythm before a World Cup. In the run-up to South Africa 2010, there was high anxiety of the tournament being engulfed by crime. I was sent on a hostile-environment course and taught how to do an emergency tracheotomy with a pencil to the neck in case the situation arose. I had armed security – yet the only thing I was at risk of in South Africa was sunburn. The country was beset with issues but the World Cup was fine.

The 2014 World Cup in Brazil was preceded by fears of violence. Early on, police skirmished with protestors angered at money being lavished on football rather than spent on improving conditions in the favelas. But the carnival of football was largely unaffected.

In the countdown to Russia 2018, there were worries amongst England's black players that their families might be racially abused. Danny Rose initially told his relatives not to travel but changed his mind when experiencing the country. There was plenty wrong with Russia, but England families and fans were largely well-treated out there.

There was so much intense criticism of human rights going into Qatar 2022, and the rights of workers building the stadia, that some of us were politely invited to an audience with the Emir – at the local padel courts in Doha – to discuss the western media view of the Arab state. As with

all World Cups, the focus shifted from doubt and debate to hope and excitement when the first ball was kicked, albeit still laced with caveats of concern. There was some terrific football in Qatar, great stories like Morocco reaching the semi-finals, an epic climax in Argentina 3-3 France and Lionel Messi lifting the trophy.

So where are we now? The draw is done, the opponents known, and some of the footballing challenges come into focus. But there is still plenty to fret over. The competition has been expanded to 48 countries, which inevitably dilutes the quality, and could make it even more of a fatigue-stained marathon, especially in the heat in certain parts.

I covered USA '94 and still recall the ferocious heat in Detroit and Washington. I still recoil at the memory of a colleague in the press box at RFK Stadium in D.C. with a line of sweat rising up his shirt, like a tide slowly coming in.

Up for grabs...FIFA president Gianni Infantino holds the World Cup trophy

especially with concerns over the Mexican border.

Security will be incredibly tight. Presidents will dominate agendas, whether Donald Trump or Infantino. The suspension of Cristiano Ronaldo's suspension has signposted what many fear about 2026: a show about stars and all the president's men.

And cost. A standard room in a decent hotel in Dallas for the semi-final is $6,675 for a three-night package per person but has to have dual occupancy, so double your dollars – hopefully breakfast is included. A standard room at the Hyatt in Manhattan for the final is $18,515 for a four-night package, per person.

Ticket pricing, let alone the dementors of dynamic ticket pricing, has already given fans a taste of the large bill to come. Opening games start at $560 (£417), ten times the hike from Qatar. A few are on offer for $60 (£44), as FIFA highlights, but they are few and very far back. For a group-stage game in East Rutherford, a single match ticket and access to the pitchside lounge will set you back $4,500 per person. For those wanting a suite at the quarter-final at Foxborough Stadium, Boston, it's $252,800 for 32 tickets. Food, drink and car-parking included.

All these issues will rumble across social media and the front and back pages and through the bulletins. Unlike previous World Cups, the central concern – cost – will continue through the tournament. But like previous tournaments, the football will seize the imagination. The Tartan Army will bring a dash of colour, and many decibels. There will be quirky tales about the smaller nations, the back-stories of those representing Curacao and Cape Verde, the journeys that they've been on.

And the stars will come out to shine. Kylian Mbappe, Estevao, Ousmane Dembele, Jude Bellingham, Jamal Musiala and the last hurrah of Lionel Messi v Cristiano Ronaldo. So forget the men in suits, it's those in boots that will be celebrated and cherished.

The draw is done, the opponents known, and some of the footballing challenges come into focus. But there is still plenty to fret over

Travel, and carbon footprint, will be even more of an issue in 2026 because of the distances and the huge numbers of fans of 48 teams attending 104 games in 16 cities across three countries (3,000 miles between the furthest venues but clusters of games makes sense). Visa issues could be complicated,

Remembering Billy Bonds

The sad news of Billy Bonds passing away, aged 79, brought a flood of warm reminiscences about the West Ham United legend. Fans recalled his record 799 performances for the club, giving everything in every game, including triumphant FA Cup finals in 1975 and 1980. Team-mates praised his quality as a humble, very likeable man, as well as a fearless, totally reliable player, first at right-back and then as midfield minder for the elegant Trevor Brooking.

We've been fortunate in the England press team to call upon former players who'd moved into the media. Brooking played for us one day in Tbilisi in 1996 against our Georgian counterparts, who were slightly more physical than

West Ham icons... a mural dedicated to Billy Bonds and Trevor Brooking near Upton Park

we'd bargained for. They particularly targeted Brooking, especially after he scored, and even the sanguine Brooking eventually complained. His point was rather underlined when a Georgian responded by punching him.

"I had Billy Bonds looking after me for my whole career," Brooking reflected later that day of his lack of protection. "Today I had Ray Wilkins."

The graceful Wilkins is another who left us too soon. Now Bonds. He more than looked after Brooking in games. He looked after the team, the club and his family. Bonds was such a big-hearted, caring character as well as such a good footballer and team man that it still seems crazy that he was never capped by England.

Bonds was a byword for honesty and loyalty as a player, the antithesis of some in the modern era, money-driven and over-theatrical. It feels like a light has gone out of the game with the passing of Billy Bonds, a beacon of selflessness. Rest In Peace.

Obituary on page 20.

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

Putting Pachuca back on the map

Meet Jesus Martinez Patino, the owner of Grupo Pachuca and the man behind the International Football Hall of Fame

Never mind the ever-evolving Ballon d'Or. Forget FIFA's The Best. In Mexico, at least, the only awards ceremony that matters sees the annual inductions to the *Salon de la Fama del Futbol* in Pachuca. The Cornish tin miners who brought their footballs with them to the North American country in the late 19th century would be astonished.

The *Salon*, a Latin American hall of fame, is the brainchild of multi-millionaire businessman Jesus Martinez Patino and is only one corner of his Grupo Pachuca empire that also owns six clubs, a university of sports science, high-quality training centre and medical centre of excellence.

Yet Pachuca is more than an outlier in the unfolding football world of multi-club ownership. This is because the city itself, some 60 miles northeast of the capital Mexico City, in the state of Hidalgo, is the very cradle of Mexican football.

The hall of fame sits, like a giant white steel and glass football, on the outskirts of Pachuca. On its construction, it sat in splendid isolation like some alien spaceship. Now it is disappearing, Wembley-style, amid the surrounding development. A shopping centre, hotels, restaurants and distribution hubs all contribute to the wealth of what 68-year-old Martinez Patino describes modestly as "the family business."

Grupo Pachuca owner...Jesus Martinez Patino

The value to the city is evident at the celebrations surrounding the gala: everyone who is anyone in Pachuca, politicians and business leaders, want to sup at the table of Martinez Patino. But football in Pachuca is not all about today's glitz and glamour.

An hour's drive out to the hilly heights above the old mining town of Real del Monte reveals the *Panteón Inglés*, the English cemetery for the Cornish men and families who brought their mining expertise and football itself to Mexico in the late 19th century.

> Pachuca, some 60 miles northeast of the capital Mexico City, in the state of Hidalgo, is the very cradle of Mexican football

Buried here also are members of the family of Francis Rule, a mining engineer from Camborne who emigrated to Mexico aged 17 in 1854. He became immensely wealthy by using the latest pumping equipment to exploit the silver mines. *El Rey de la Plata* (the Silver King) founded Mexico's first football club on November 1, 1892.

Pachuca Football Club duly evolved into the Pachuca Athletic Club and, now – since 1960 – the Club de Futbol Pachuca. Its heritage lives on in its nickname of *Los Tuzos*, The Gophers.

History was one of the factors that attracted Martinez Patino in 1995. He says: "Even as a boy and just a football fan I had a dream to

own a team. As a player, I had a lot of enthusiasm but no talent. Then the opportunity came in 1995. Pachuca were in the second division. The state owned the club but were losing lots of money, so the governor called me. He knew I was passionate about football. This was not a good business because they were losing $2 million a year but could I take the whole thing off their hands?

"I knew it had potential to be one of the best teams in Mexico because it was the oldest in Mexico and that was a branding strategy which could be appealing. So the family bought it and were successful very quickly. We hired Javier Aguirre who was nobody as a coach at the time. We gave him his opportunity. He took us into the first division and has kept on going. He was successful because we gave him the chance to do the job properly."

Football on the pitch and in the league table was just the start. Martinez Patino was ahead of his time. "I knew other owners who wanted just titles or money but this had the potential for not just those but for education and sports medicine," he says.

"My ambition was to develop a 360-degree business. So now our educational programmes have helped 100,000 children, we have just opened the second stage of the medical centre, our sports science university which offer MBAs and PhDs in careers like management, business, communications as well as physical education, and we have the best football training centre specifically for women anywhere in the world."

Mexico's football establishment was suspicious of Martinez Patino and his Pachuca project. He says: "At first it was very hard because here in Mexico we used to have two TV networks who owned teams and I fought to break from that model. The other owners did not take me seriously at first but, once they saw we were winning not only games but titles [15 including seven Liga MX titles, the Copa Sudamericana and six CONCACAF Champions Cups/Leagues] and introducing a new model, a new way of thinking and walking, then they respected me – though I think they still don't like me because I'm not one of them."

Here, FIFA endorsement was important. "Sepp Blatter, when he was FIFA president, came three or four times to watch my team play," Martinez Patino recalls. "I showed him the project for our medical centre and he said: 'Are you asking me for money?' I said: 'No, I just want your endorsement,' and he was happy with that."

The FIFA seal of approval has survived the fall of the house of Blatter – the *Salon de la Fama del Futbol* gala opened with a fulsome video message from Gianni Infantino – but it didn't save the Grupo Pachuca from falling foul of FIFA's multi-club ownership regulations at last summer's Club World Cup. Pachuca had qualified by winning the 2024 CONCACAF Champions Cup and sister club Leon sealed their spot following their success in 2023. Leon were subsequently removed. Now they have been sidelined in a foundation trust but football ownership, of course, is an opaque business.

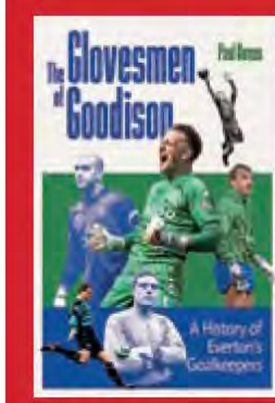
Pachuca's other interests, for the record, include Real Oviedo (Spain), Everton de Vina del Mar (Chile), Atletico Atenas (Uruguay) and their junior Mexican club Tlaxcala FC (the Coyotes). Previous investments included Talleres de Cordoba (Argentina) and Mineros de Zacatecas (Mexico).

The *Salon de la Fama* is the fun part of the operation. Latest inductees included old Mexican stars such as Gerardo Torrado, Luis Flores and Miguel Espana plus international veterans such as England's Gary Lineker and goalkeepers Iker Casillas (Spain), Ubaldo Fillol (Argentina) and Rene Higuita (Colombia).

"Here in Mexico," says Martinez Patino, "there's a lot of jealousy so no one wanted to recognise other teams' favourites. But I believed that the old players deserved recognition, not only the new stars. I wanted to give back to football because it has been generous to me and I wanted to give back to the people who make football possible: the players, not us."

***Salon de la Fama del Futbol*...the view from outside the International Football Hall of Fame** *Credit: Alamy*

BOOKS THIS MONTH



THE GLOVESMEN OF GOODISON
By Paul Owens
(Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

The Glovesmen of Goodison explores the careers of the goalkeepers who have stood between the sticks for Everton – including Ted Sagar, Gordon West, Brian Labone, Nigel Martyn, Neville Southall, Tim Howard, Jordan Pickford and Rachel Brown-Finnis – with exclusive insight from the keepers themselves. Featuring chapters on every period in the club's rich goalkeeping past, this is a must-read book for Evertonians and goalkeeping aficionados.

BRING ME SUNSHINE
By Warren Turner
(Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Bring Me Sunshine goes behind the scenes to tell the remarkable story of Luton Town's rise from non-league to the Premier League, told through exclusive interviews with players, coaches and executives who made it happen. This is a book not only for Hatters fans, but for all football lovers with an appetite for a classic rags-to-riches tale.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

More set-plays, less fluency; more target-men, fewer poachers

How VAR has fundamentally changed the way that football is played

Football is a complex game. An action taken in one area to rectify one issue will almost certainly have a knock-on effect elsewhere, which is why any change to the laws of the game should be undertaken with great caution.

Take, for example, the introduction of three points for a win, implemented in the English leagues from 1981-82. The theory, set out by Jimmy Hill, was that it would make football more attacking. In fact, it led to teams with a lead fighting harder to retain it: what went up was not the number of goals but the number of fouls and bookings.

VAR, inevitably, has had its own impact. Discussion tends to centre on whether decisions are actually correct and the delays to the game, the interruption to the rhythm, which are of course important. But VAR has also changed how the game is actually played.

Perhaps the most striking feature of last summer's transfer window was how many fairly classical centre-forwards changed hands for vast sums of money. With Alexander Isak, Benjamin Sesko, Viktor Gyokeres, Hugo Ekitike and Nick Woltemade all making big moves, and Erling Haaland already established, it felt like a reversion to the football of the 1980s. VAR is not the only reason for the return of the target man, but it is at least in part responsible.

VAR has changed offside. From 1992, to be level with the penultimate defensive player was to be onside. In practice, of course, that was almost impossible for a linesman to judge, and the tendency was for forwards to get the benefit of the doubt. So a forward could be three or four inches ahead of the relevant defender and still reasonably expect to be considered onside. This was understood and accepted; defenders knew that to play a forward offside and be relatively confident the linesman would give it, the core of their body had to be obviously in advance of the forward's core.

Penalty-box chaos... Fuham v Manchester United in August

> It's hardly a surprise that the number of goals from set-plays has gone up. Forwards can make blocking runs or hold defenders and are very unlikely to be penalised

That has gone now: forwards can be played offside by a pixel. Level, that convenient compromise, has effectively been taken out of the game. That makes it harder for forwards to get behind defenders to make a run on goal. Life has been made much harder for the Pippo Inzaghi style of slight sniffer goalscorers and so, not surprisingly, they have effectively faded from the elite level of the game.

But in one area, VAR has made life far easier for forwards. One of the problems is that it is not used consistently – not in the sense that an incident will be given as a foul one week that was not given the week before, but in its design. VAR checks goals and it will check penalty shouts;

Dying breed ...players like Pippo Inzaghi would struggle in the VAR age

it does not check for free-kicks in the box to a defending side. So when a corner comes in, attacking players – who are only risking a free-kick – effectively have carte blanche to wrestle and grapple. But if a defender does it, even if they manage to avoid the gaze of the referee, VAR could give a penalty against them.

Perhaps you think that's good, that the laws should favour the attacking side. The infantile lust for goals at any cost is why someone in football has mysteriously decided that a forward standing offside in the middle of the six-yard box is somehow not interfering as a shot flashes past a goalkeeper standing a few feet behind that forward. But it creates absurdities.

Take, for example, the penalty Manchester United were awarded at Fulham earlier this season as Calvin Bassey wrestled Mason Mount to the ground. It was, fairly clearly, a foul. But six feet behind Mount and Bassey, Luke Shaw was committing essentially the same foul on Rodrigo Muniz. VAR can only look at the incident that might lead to a penalty. So even though a player from each side was committing a foul, the same foul, VAR could only penalise one of them. That, obviously, hands a massive advantage to the attacking team.

In that context, it's hardly a surprise that the number of goals from set-plays, be that corners, free-kicks or throw-ins, has gone up. Forwards can make blocking runs or hold defenders and are very unlikely to be penalised. Even if a goal is scored, the instinct is to let it stand. But defenders feel always the eye of the unseen deity watching them, judging them, waiting to hand the attacking side a 75% chance of a goal.

Its defenders will point out that VAR means there are fewer wrong decisions than ever before, and that may be true, but what is not seen is how it has changed the nature of the game. VAR has made the game more stop-start and increased the value of set-plays. Is that the football we want? Is the loss of fluency worth it to get a few more decisions right?

ANISIO Cabral

(Portugal)

Anisio was the star of the title-winning attack at this youth tournament with seven goals and an assist to his name, including the winner in the final against Austria. The tall striker has a great nose for goal, with his clever movement in the box invariably getting him on the end of chances, but he showcased much more to his game than just scoring at these finals. His willingness to run off the ball, using his frame to pin and spin past centre-backs, and demonstrating decent link-up play even with a marker tight at his back all caught the eye. The highly-rated 17-year-old has already made a couple of appearances for Benfica's Under-23 side and, after his impressive performances in Qatar, it surely won't be long before he features in the senior team for the Lisbon giants.

Matheus MIDE
(Portugal)
While his team-mate made the headlines by scoring in the final, Mide was the architect behind the goal with a sumptuous pass in the build-up. His excellent awareness and deft touch made him popular with the technical panel, who awarded him the Golden Ball.

ZE LUCAS
(Brazil)
The *Canarinha* captain's relentless intensity and on-ball silkiness made him stand out in the middle of the park in all of his matches. Having already started over 20 games this season for Sport Recife, senior Brazil boss Carlo Ancelotti could well be watching.

Reigan HESKEY
(England)
Although he starred on the left wing, Heskey showed shades of his father Emile in his game. He combined clever movement with speed and strength to burst through challenges, returning with six goal involvements.

Johannes MOSER
(Austria)
Moser took home the Golden Boot thanks to eight goals for the tournament runners-up. Starting on the left, he regularly showcased his lively dribbling ability and clean ball-striking.

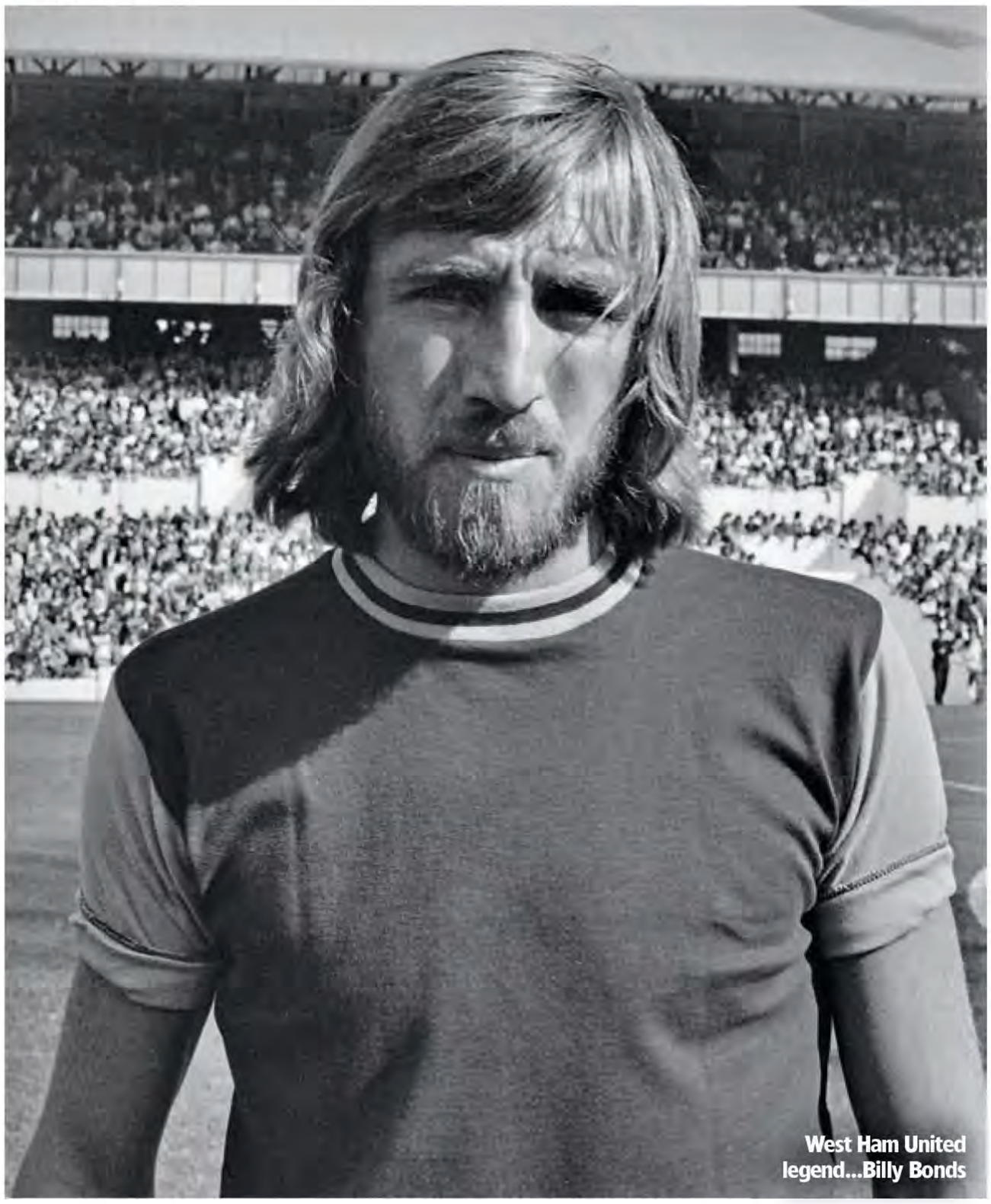
Neel Shelat

Full tournament review on page 86

"Billy Bonds epitomised everything that West Ham United Football Club stands for. Honesty, integrity, commitment, courage and character. He was a gentleman off the pitch and a warrior on it"

Another former West Ham United captain, Mark Noble, pays tribute to Hammers great Billy Bonds

OBITUARIES

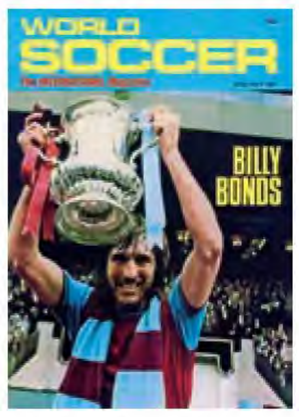


West Ham United legend...Billy Bonds

Billy BONDS
(1946-2025)
Billy Bonds embodied the ethos of West Ham United, admired for his determination, leadership and loyalty. He began his playing career at Charlton Athletic, making his league debut in 1965, before being sold to West Ham for £47,000 two years later. He made a club record 799 appearances (61 goals), initially at right-back and then in the so-called "silk and steel" midfield alongside Trevor Brooking. Bonds captained the Hammers to FA Cup success in 1975 and 1980 then, as manager, led them to promotions in 1991 and 1993. In 2018, fans voted him the club's greatest-ever player. Later he briefly managed Millwall and was appointed an MBE. In 2019, the East Stand at West Ham's London Stadium was renamed the Billy Bonds Stand.

Daniel WILLINGTON
(1942-2025)
Star and later coach of Argentine side Talleres de Cordoba for whom his father had played. Willington scored 66 goals in 168 matches in winning 17 regional titles with Talleres. Later starred in the Velez Sarsfield team that won their first national title in 1968. Also played for Huracan, Instituto de Cordoba and Mexico's Veracruz, and scored once in six appearances for Argentina.

Constantin ZAMFIR
(1951-2025)
Nicknamed the "New Gento" by the Spanish media after his speedy displays on the wing in a pre-season tour after joining Steaua Bucharest from Petrolul Ploiesti in 1975. Won 11 caps for Romania and claimed two titles and two cups with Steaua. Boyhood hero of Ilie Dumitrescu who compared him to Ryan Giggs.



FA Cup winner...Bonds on the front cover of the June/July 1975 issue of *World Soccer*

World Cup 2018... Simonyan helped conduct the draw for the Russia finals

Xabier AZKARGORTA
(1953-2025)
Basque coach who led Bolivia, in the first of two spells, to the 1994 World Cup finals. Also coached Chile, Yokohama Marinos and Guadalajara and spent two years as Real Madrid's academy head in central and South America. Started his playing career in the youth sections of Real Sociedad and Athletic Club, before being forced to retire by injury at 24 without ever having played a senior league game.

Tributes paid ...a minute's silence for Azkargorta before November's Japan v Bolivia friendly

Ronny PASLA
(1947-2025)
One of Indonesia's best-ever goalkeepers. Won 31 caps from 1967 to 1979, winning four regional prizes with Team Garuda.

Tulyugan ISAKOV
(1949-2025)
Uzbek attacking star of Pakhtakor whose life was saved because injury prevented him from joining his team-mates on the doomed flight to Minsk in August 1979. Pakhtakor's plane was involved in a mid-air collision over Ukraine and all 178 people in the two aircraft died, including 17 players and staff of the Tashkent-based side. Isakov was so traumatised by his escape that he never played again.

Nikita SIMONYAN
(1926–2025)
One of the Soviet Union's greatest-ever footballers and a legendary figure for Spartak Moscow, for whom he was record marksman with 160 goals. An outstanding deep-lying centre-forward, he was a key figure in the USSR team that won Olympic gold in 1956 and reached the quarter-finals on their World Cup debut in 1958. Later coached Ararat Yerevan to the Soviet Top League title in 1973 before becoming executive vice-president of the Russian federation. Prided himself on his memory for the great five-man forward-lines of his era.

"One of the greatest men of Romanian football, without a doubt"

Razvan Burleanu, the president of the Romanian football federation, pays his respects to former Romania and Steaua Bucharest head coach Emerich Jenei

Dieter HERZOG
(1946-2025)
Intelligent left-winger whose five caps for West Germany included two in the victorious 1974 World Cup campaign on home soil. Herzog scored 69 goals in more than 350 Bundesliga games for Fortuna Dusseldorf and Bayer Leverkusen, and was a key member of the Fortuna team that placed third in the Bundesliga in both 1973 and 1974.

Kjell KASPERSEN
(1939-2025)
The only goalkeeper in the history of the Norway national team to score a goal, converting a penalty against Thailand in 1965 during one of his 34 caps.

Emerich JENEI
(1937-2025)
Played six times in defence for Romania between 1959 and 1964 before earning a stellar reputation as head coach of the Steaua Bucharest team that won five league titles and three domestic cups but, above all, defeated Barcelona on penalties in the 1986 European Cup final. Subsequently led Romania to the World Cup finals in 1990 and to the quarter-finals of Euro 2000.

European Cup-winning coach...Emerich Jenei

Stoyan YORDANOV
(1944-2025)
One of the greatest goalkeepers in the history of Bulgarian football and CSKA Sofia. Joined the army club in 1961 and for 16 years was an integral part of the first team, winning seven league titles and five cups. Olympic silver medallist with Bulgaria in Mexico City in 1968 and won 25 caps between 1968 and 1977, including at the 1970 World Cup.

Mohamed BEN MOUSSA
(1954-2025)
Tunisia forward who starred for Club Africain in the 1970s and was a member of the national team squad on their World Cup finals debut in Argentina in 1978.

Sven LINDMAN
(1942-2025)
A legend of Swedish giants Djurgarden, scoring 49 goals in 312 league games across two spells for the club either side of a year in Austria at Rapid Vienna. The midfielder scored once in 21 games for Sweden between 1967 and 1974, and ended his international career after being an unused squad member at the 1974 World Cup in West Germany.

Wales international... Rod Thomas in 1976

Roland "Roly" HOWARD
(1935-2025)
Record-breaking long-serving manager, who led English non-league side Marine for 33 years between 1972 and 2005, clocking up no fewer than 1,975 games in charge. No manager in world football has led one team for longer.

Mohamed SABRY
(1974-2025)
Egyptian midfielder who played all his senior club career at Zamalek, winning every domestic prize plus the CAF Champions League in 1996 and 2002, African Cup Winners' Cup in 2000, CAF Super Cup twice and Afro-Asian Cup in 1997. Unlucky to win only eight Egypt caps in the late 1990s.

Gerard HAUSSER
(1941-2025)
Lively left-winger from Strasbourg who scored twice in 14 games for France in the run-up to and during the 1966 World Cup. Also played for Karlsruhe and Metz.

Andre DE NUL
(1946-2025)
Forward with Eendracht Aalst, Lierse and Anderlecht with whom he won the league title, cup and League Cup. Later played for Union Saint-Gilloise, and Rot-Weiss Essen in Germany. Scored twice in three games for Belgium in 1971.

Lennart SVENSSON
(1934-2025)
Twice-capped Sweden midfielder from a noted football family who starred for Malmo between 1956 and 1966, winning the league in 1965. Nicknamed "Lill-Kick" after his father Erik "Kick", who also played for the club 30 years earlier.

Rod THOMAS
(1947-2025)
Former Swindon Town and Derby County left-back who was a regular for Wales, winning 50 caps between 1967 and 1977. Won the League Cup with Swindon in 1969 and then the league title with Derby in 1975. Also played for Cardiff City and Newport County.

Andriy POLUNIN
(1971-2025)
Ex-Ukraine midfielder who died after collapsing during a veterans match. Represented the national team nine times in midfield and defence while with now-defunct Dnipro Dnipropetrovsk, and also had spells in Germany with Nuremberg, St Pauli and Rot-Weiss Essen.

Rudolf BELIN
(1942-2025)
Croatian defender or midfielder who took great pride from having played against Pele five times for club and country without ever finishing on the losing side. Belin scored six goals in 29 appearances for Yugoslavia and was a member of the squad that finished third at the 1968 European Championship. Earlier, he had played at the 1964 Summer Olympics in Japan where Yugoslavia reached the quarter-finals. With Dinamo Zagreb, Belin won three Yugoslav Cups and the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup, scoring crucial goals in the quarter-final and semi-final victories over Juventus and Eintracht Frankfurt. After retiring, Belin led Dinamo's youth academy and later coached Toronto Croatia in Canada and the Iraq national team.

Lorenzo BUFFON
(1929-2025)
Italy's original Buffon won Serie A four times with Milan in the 1950s, before crossing over to Internazionale and winning another in 1963. He retired a year later after one season and one match with Fiorentina. Buffon, second cousin of Gianluigi's grandfather, won 15 caps for Italy between 1958 and the 1962 World Cup in Chile. One of those matches, a 3-2 defeat to England in Rome in 1961, cost him a broken nose.

Words by Keir Radnedge

Bloody nose...Buffon is carried off the field during Italy's 3-2 defeat to England in 1961

"This will be the first time that 'The Red Wall' – our passionate Wales fans – will experience a major international tournament on home soil. It's a truly historic occasion"

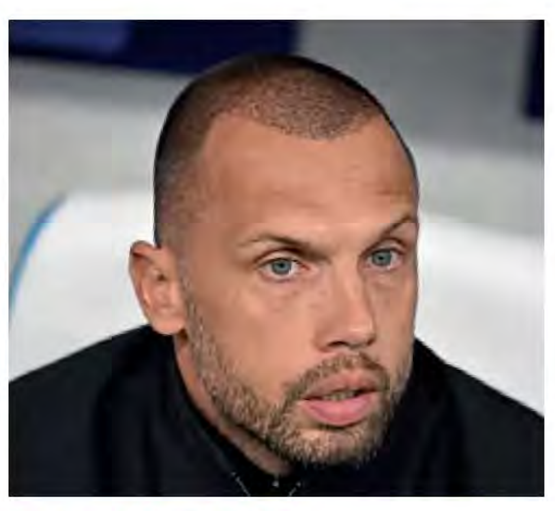
Football Association of Wales chief executive Noel Mooney confirms that Cardiff will host the first game of Euro 2028

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Wilfried NANCY

Highly rated for the entertaining brand of football that his Columbus Crew side played in MLS, Nancy was hired by **Celtic** five weeks after the resignation of Brendan Rodgers.



John HEITINGA

Ajax parted company with their former defender less than six months after appointing him as head coach. Heitinga's assistant Fred Grim took over as caretaker.

Roberto MANCINI

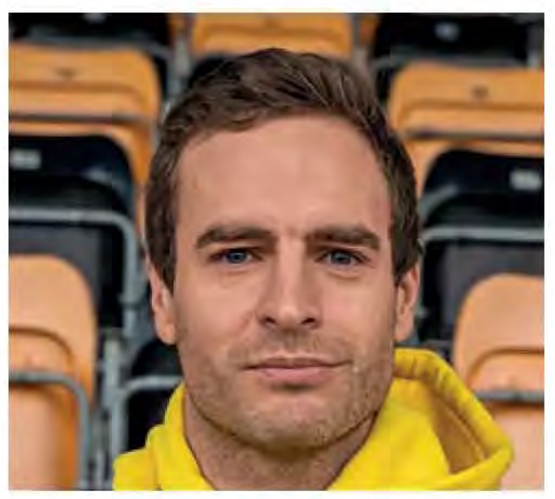
Returning to club football for the first time since 2018 – following spells with Italy and Saudi Arabia – the 61-year-old took charge of Qatari champions **Al Sadd**.

Raffaele PALLADINO

Six months on from leaving his role as Fiorentina boss Palladino was named **Atalanta** head coach, replacing Ivan Juric who was sacked after just 15 games in charge.

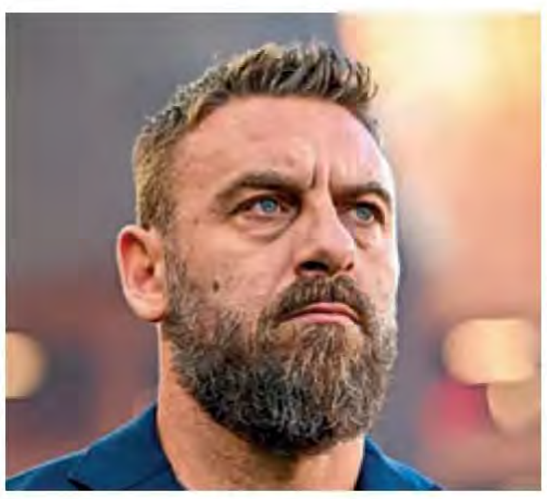
Per Mathias HOGMO

Perennial Bulgarian champions **Ludogorets** hired the Norwegian coach after a disastrous start to the season. Hogmo took charge with the team in fifth, 11 points off top spot.



Karl Marius AKSUM

After **Mjallby**'s historic Swedish title triumph, they promoted enterprising assistant Aksum to head coach, with his predecessor Anders Torstensson becoming technical director.



Daniele DE ROSSI

Serie A strugglers **Genoa** hired the ex-Italy midfielder to replace Patrick Vieira, who left the club in November by mutual consent. De Rossi's last role was with boyhood club Roma.

Marc BRYS

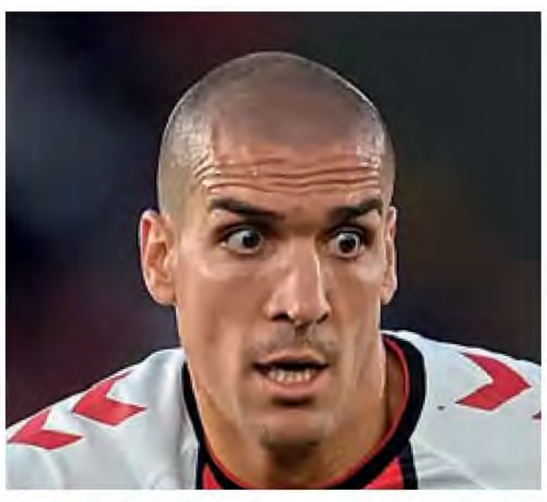
Cameroon fired their head coach on the eve of AFCON, following a long-running dispute between the Belgian and the head of the Cameroonian FA, Samuel Eto'o.

Rudolph SPEID

After Steve McClaren's exit, **Jamaica** hired Speid for March's World Cup play-offs. Elsewhere, Honduras and Costa Rica sacked Reinaldo Rueda and Miguel Herrera respectively.

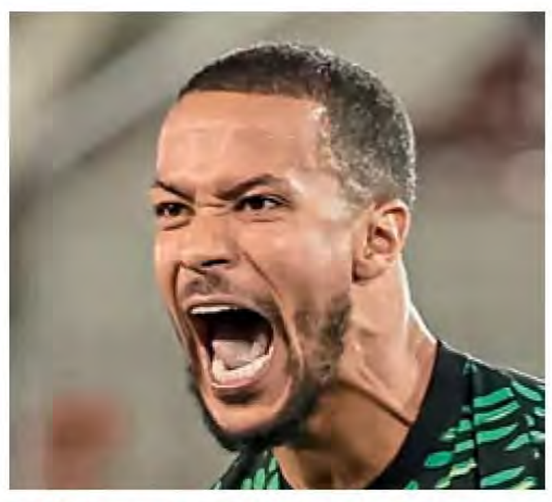
Shao JIAYI

After a series of foreign managers, **China** appointed Jiayi, a former youth coach and assistant for the Chinese FA, who had been leading Qingdao West Coast in the CSL.



Oriol ROMEU

Having been released by Barcelona at the end of last season, the 34-year-old midfielder returned to former club **Southampton** in the English Championship.



William TROOST-EKONG

The Player of the Tournament at the last AFCON (see page 98), and **Nigeria**'s ninth-most capped player with 83 appearances, announced his international retirement.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

NOVEMBER 2025

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	12
Mike Maignan (Milan)	4
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	2
Mile Svilar (Roma)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Luiz Junior (Villarreal)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	15
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	10
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	7
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	7
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	7
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
William Saliba (Arsenal)	4
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	3
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	3
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	3
Marc Guehi (Crystal Palace)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	2
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	1
Sergino Dest (PSV)	1
Wesley Fofana (Chelsea)	1
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Jakub Kiwior (Porto)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Marquinhos (PSG)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Willian Pacho (PSG)	1
Benjamin Pavard (Marseille)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Milan)	1
Malick Thiaw (Newcastle United)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	9
Vitinha (PSG)	9
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	8
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	5
Luka Modric (Milan)	5
Pedri (Barcelona)	5
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	4
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	4
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	4
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	3
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Joao Neves (PSG)	2
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Nathan De Cat (Anderlecht)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	1
Lennart Karl (Bayern Munich)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1
Florian Thauvin (Lens)	1

FORWARDS

Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	27
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	21
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	18
Luis Diaz (Bayern Munich)	3
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	3
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Antoine Semenyo (Bournemouth)	2
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Estevao (Chelsea)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	1
Troy Parrott (AZ)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Igor Thiago (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Kenan Yildiz (Juventus)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

"I made that call as a coach, not as a dad, because we needed a goal. Shaqueel is a player who can score a goal from all angles"

Feyenoord head coach Robin van Persie after handing his son, Shaqueel, his senior debut in a Europa League clash with Celtic

The month in numbers

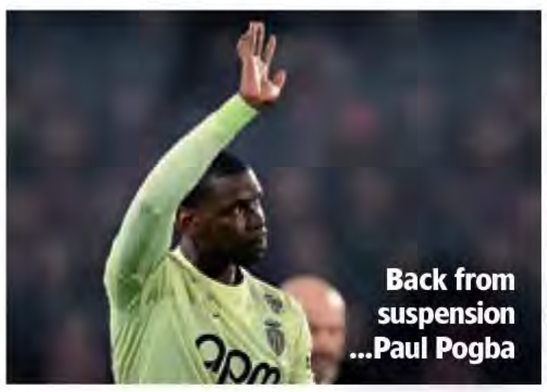
The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

4
Goals that Leicester City's Hamza Choudhury scored in his first year for Bangladesh, including a bicycle kick in his team's 2-2 friendly draw with Nepal in November.

2027
Year that Major League Soccer will change its calendar to align with other leagues around the world. The US top flight will switch to a summer-spring format instead of the February-December routine that it currently operates with.

150,000
Approximate population of Dutch Caribbean island nation Curacao, making it the smallest country to ever qualify for the World Cup.

811
Days that Paul Pogba spent away from football before the 32-year-old made his return to action for new club Monaco in their Ligue 1 defeat to Rennes in November.



Back from suspension ...Paul Pogba

16
Age of talented Ecuadorian twins Edwin and Holger Quintero, who will join Premier League giants Arsenal from Independiente del Valle when they turn 18 in 2027.

34
Years since Viking last won a Norwegian league title before claiming the 2025 Eliteserien crown (more on page 80).

CAF Awards night...Achraf Hakimi and Ghizlane Chebbak collect their trophies

2
Number of Moroccans to win African Footballer of the Year at the 2025 CAF Awards: Achraf Hakimi in the men's category and Ghizlane Chebbak in the women's. The last Moroccan to win the prize was former Coventry and Aston Villa midfielder Mustapha Hadji in 1998.

38
Years and 218 days, age of former Brazil defender David Luiz when he scored for Pafos against Monaco to become the second-oldest scorer in Champions League history.

0
Days that Haiti coach Sebastien Migne has spent in the country, despite leading the Caribbean nation to their first World Cup finals since 1974. The team have been playing their home matches 500 miles away in Curacao due to ongoing domestic conflict.

17
Red cards dished out after a chaotic cup clash between Real Oruro and Blooming in Bolivia. Police had to intervene after a mass brawl broke out after the final whistle.

71.6%
Pep Guardiola's managerial win rate after 1,000 games, a milestone that he surpassed in Manchester City's 3-0 win over Liverpool in November.

22
Number of stadiums included in the UK's bid to host the Women's 2035 World Cup – 16 in England, three in Wales, two in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. Edinburgh, Manchester, Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Newcastle, Nottingham, Wrexham, Sunderland, Brighton, Bristol and Trafford were among the venues included.

31
International games that Spain have remained unbeaten, matching the European men's record set by Italy between 2018 and 2021.

31 not out...Spain could overtake Italy's record in 2026

28
Years that European trio Norway, Scotland and Austria had gone without qualifying for the World Cup, before ending that barren spell by sealing their spots at the 2026 finals (more on page 70).

51
Age of Luis Vidal, president of Paraguayan club Recoleta, when he came off the bench during his team's league meeting with Nacional Asuncion to become the league's oldest-ever player.

€200m
Lyon's losses for the 2024-25 season, the worst financial results in the French club's history.

111
Games that it took Erling Haaland to score 100 Premier League goals, beating Alan Shearer (124), Harry Kane (141), Sergio Aguero (147) and Thierry Henry (160) as the quickest player to hit the milestone.

Landmark goal...Erling Haaland

62,000
Proposed capacity of Birmingham City's new stadium. The English club are aiming for it to be completed in time for the 2030-31 season.

3
Trophies Lionel Messi has won for Inter Miami after adding the MLS Cup to his Supporters' Shield and Leagues Cup (read our full review of the MLS season next month).

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eyewitness

Tim Vickery reports

PERU/BRAZIL

Brazil's finest

Flamengo become Brazilian and South American champions in the same week

Back in 2019, Flamengo began the era of Brazilian domination in the Copa Libertadores, snatching two late goals to beat Argentina's River Plate in the final in Lima. Six years later, the same city, and the same stadium, played host to another Flamengo triumph, as they overcame Palmeiras 1-0 in the duel of the titans, the race to become the first Brazilian side to accumulate four Libertadores titles.

Filipe Luis was the team's experienced left-back in 2019. Now he was the relatively inexperienced coach, savouring the most important win of his young career. As Flamengo turned the Peruvian capital into a Pacific version of Rio de Janeiro, Filipe Luis spoke of his satisfaction at "increasing the mystique of Lima."

But an unforgettable game for Flamengo fans will not prove to be especially memorable for many others. The meeting of the two teams who have dominated Brazilian and South American football in recent times, the so-called "final of the century", fell well short of expectations. The showpiece occasion was frequently dour and ugly, with only occasional outbreaks of something resembling top-class football.

A repeat of their recent free-flowing league meeting, won 3-2 by Flamengo, was always unlikely. But where that match was attractive, this one was attritional.

The key unknown going into the final was the approach of Palmeiras head coach Abel Ferreira. In that mid-October league game he had pressed high. A repeat was not probable, but this time he may well have gone too far the other way. Perhaps planning was thrown awry at the last minute, when Palmeiras found themselves stuck in traffic on the way to the ground – a hazard of using ▸

Champions of South America...Flamengo's Giorgian de Arrascaeta and Bruno Henrique jointly lift the Copa Libertadores trophy to kick off the post-match celebrations

Match-winner...Danilo celebrates scoring the only goal of the final

Univeritario's Monumental Stadium, which has a big capacity but is situated on the edge of town with only one road to take all the traffic.

The kick-off was delayed by 15 minutes, and it is possible that the rush had an impact on a Palmeiras side who "were lacking a little bit of courage and darting," according to their own coach. Ferreira had clearly prepared a defensive game plan; Flamengo have struggled against teams playing with a back five, and therefore blocking the late forward bursts of right-back Guillermo Varela. And so Bruno Fuchs came in as a third centre-back, allowing Joaquin Piquerez to block Varela down the flank. Flamengo, then, were handed the task of trying to work their way through the middle, a task made more difficult by the depletion of their attacking resources. Centre-forward Pedro had tried to hurry back from a fractured arm sustained in the first leg of the semi-final, only to be ruled out by a muscular problem. And his likely replacement, Ecuador forward Gonzalo Plata, was suspended after a red card in the second leg. Ferreira, then, seemed confident that he could keep Flamengo at bay and that as space opened up, his team's moment would come. It proved to be an exaggeratedly passive approach to take into the big game.

With Flamengo unable to find the fluency of their passing game and Palmeiras unwilling to take a risk, the first half was a footballing non-event. And the spectacle would have been even worse without the efforts of Argentine referee Dario Herrera to keep the play moving. Herrera, though, may have made a mistake when Flamengo's Chilean midfielder Erick Pulgar got away with only a yellow card for raking his studs down the shins of Bruno Fuchs, an inexplicably stupid moment that could have had grave consequences. But the referee decided that the contact did not have the intensity for a red card, and it was a surprise when the VAR team could not persuade him to take another look.

It speaks volumes that this was by far the biggest talking point thrown up by the first half.

There was no great change of pattern after the break. But with Palmeiras still too passive, Flamengo were able to turn the screw. Even so, Ferreira would have expected his team to be able to deal with a corner, whipped in from the right by Uruguayan Giorgian De Arrascaeta halfway through the second half. But the late run of Danilo was not picked up. Allan of Palmeiras appeared to lose concentration, allowing Danilo to burst behind him, and Bruno Fuchs was unable to close the space, and the Flamengo defender's towering header flew home off the far post.

Still part of the Brazil squad, Danilo stands as a symbol of this final. Firstly,

Decisive moment... Palmeiras goalkeeper Carlos Miguel watches as Danilo's header finds the back of the net

Final venue...Lima's Monumental Stadium

Unbridled joy...experienced Brazil right-back Danilo celebrates opening the scoring

sides were in action for a variety of national teams in Europe, Mexico and the United States – after which they were immediately flown back to be available for selection in crunch league games the following day. And there were two more crunch matches to get through before the long trip north to Lima. Towards the end of a year with a gruelling Club World Cup in the middle, it seems obvious that late season fatigue took its toll on what could and should have been a much better showpiece occasion.

The clear test of any team is how they react when forced to chase the

Late-season fatigue took its toll on what could and should have been a much better showpiece occasion

because of his age – at 34 he was one of an extraordinary quantity of eight players over 30 in the Flamengo starting XI. Of the 14 players they used, one is 25, another 27 and all the others 29 or over. Flamengo's is a team of vast experience. Palmeiras are not an especially young side (one of 20 and one of 21 in the starting line-up, with almost all the others in their mid-to-late 20s), but Ferreira pointed out after the match that these are squads "in a completely different stage of competitive maturity."

And Danilo is also symbolic because he is essentially a reserve in the Flamengo team. The senior, most important centre-back is Leo Ortiz, sound defensively and excellent at orchestrating play from the back. But he picked up an injury and, though he rushed to be back in time, was only deemed fit for a place on the bench.

Leo Ortiz was a casualty of the relentless fixture list to which these players have been subjected. With Flamengo and Palmeiras also going toe-to-toe for the league title, there was no breathing space. The games have been coming twice a week, each and every one seen as of vital importance. FIFA dates provided no respite. On Tuesday, November 18, many of the players from both

Talking point...Flamengo midfielder Erick Pulgar could have been sent off for a foul on Bruno Fuchs

Victory parade... Flamengo fans line the streets of Rio

game. In the last 20 minutes, Palmeiras made all the attacking changes available to them, and hoped for a hint of the link-up between Vitor Roque and Jose Manuel "Flaco" Lopez, the strike partnership that served them so well in the second part of the year. The closest they came was when a Lopez cross was nodded down for Vitor Roque to lash goalwards, but Danilo – that man again – appeared just in time with a vital block to send the ball over the bar.

Flamengo came even closer to a second, substitute winger Everton "Cebolinha" striking a low free-kick which Carlos Miguel tipped onto the far post. Apart from the Danilo header, it was the game's only effort on target from either side. After the match, Ferreira had no problems admitting that

Dejected duo...Palmeiras goalkeeper Carlos Miguel and striker Vitor Roque react after the narrow Copa Libertadores final defeat in Lima

Flamengo had been the better side.

A 1-0 win was perhaps a fitting way for Flamengo to claim the title. Normally a free-scoring side, their Libertadores campaign was strangely muted. They flirted with disaster in the last game of the group phase, again when the quarter-final against Estudiantes went to a shootout, and in the semi-final against Racing defending a single-goal lead with ten men.

It would seem fair to say that the campaign only featured one outstanding performance, when a highly skilled team produced its best form. That came in the second leg of the first knockout round. Defending a 1-0 lead away to compatriots Internacional, they took the heat out of the occasion with consummate skill, Jorginho controlling the action on

Cup kings...a tifo inside the Maracana as Flamengo clinch the Brazilian championship

Another Copa... Flamengo boss Filipe Luis with the trophy

the way to a 2-0 triumph. But it was an exception. In their 13 matches, they only accumulated 13 goals, and no-one scored more than two. For those who expected something more expansive, this perhaps comes as a reminder that Filipe Luis spent so much of his club career playing for Diego Simeone – a connection reinforced by his normal touchline uniform of dowdy, black clothes.

There will be plenty more to come from him, and from Ferreira as well. Both coaches have put themselves in contention for high-profile European jobs. Whatever their futures hold, it seems likely that there will be another Libertadores final between Flamengo and Palmeiras before too long. The pair are carving up both the domestic and continental titles – and after Palmeiras came out on top in 2021, and Flamengo four years later, the next one is set up to decide a best of three.

For the time being, though, the continent and the country belong to Flamengo. The day after the final the red and black shirted masses gathered to greet the team as they paraded through the centre of Rio – and three days later they had something else to celebrate.

For the time being, the continent and the country belong to Flamengo

Some 70,000 crammed into the Maracana for the penultimate game of the league season. With Palmeiras winning their match, Flamengo needed a victory against Ceara to wrap up the domestic title. Filipe Luis took no chances, selecting exactly the same side as the Libertadores final.

Before kick-off and at half-time, the stadium DJ enjoyed himself playing Sade's "Smooth Operator", allowing the fans to sing their own version of the chorus, lyrics adjusted to taunt Palmeiras. And they could taunt some more after the final whistle. A Samuel Lino goal broke dogged Ceara resistance and gave Flamengo a title-clinching 1-0 win.

With the Libertadores and the league title in the bag, Flamengo could afford to leave out the normal starters for their last domestic game, allowing them some much needed rest before rushing off to Qatar for the FIFA Intercontinental Cup.

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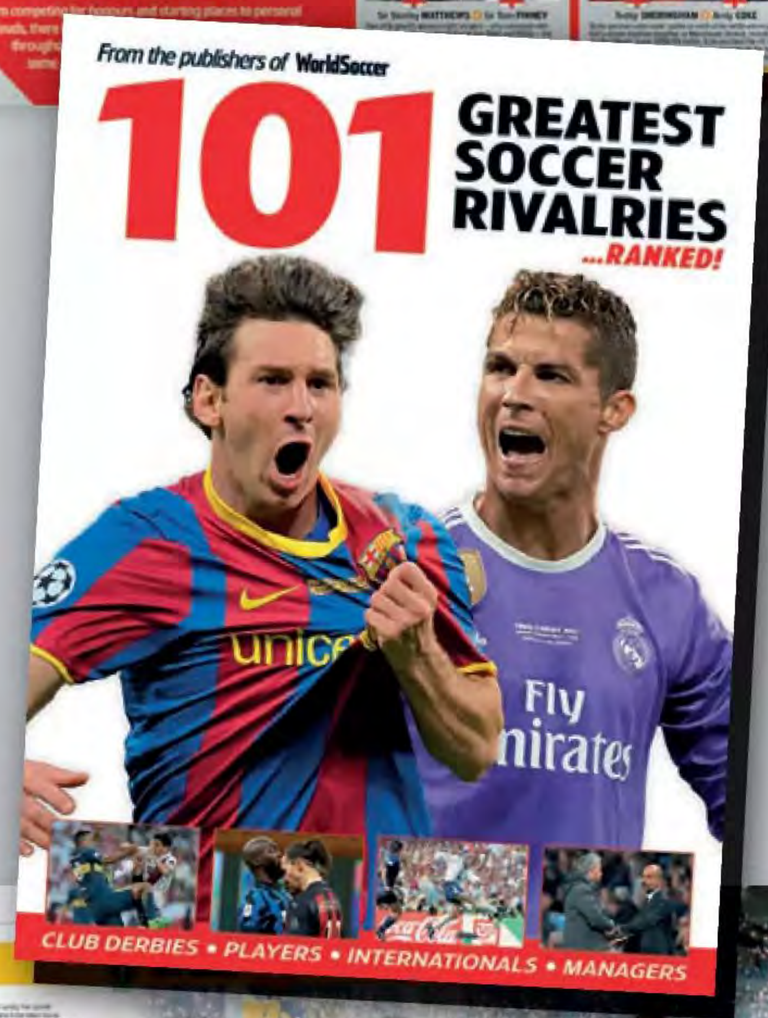

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PLAYER
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WOMEN
PEOPLE
OBITUARIES

42

38

44

36

40

DEMBELE PIPS YAMAL

France forward clinches the *World Soccer* Men's Player of the Year award in a clean sweep for Paris Saint-Germain

In the 43-year history of the *World Soccer* awards, rarely has a race between two players been so close. In 1983, Michel Platini lost out to Zico by just 4% of the vote, while Dennis Bergkamp was pipped by Marco van Basten by a similar percentage in 1992. Roberto Baggio was just 3.91% behind compatriot Paolo Maldini in 1994, while there was very little between Ronaldo, Alan Shearer and George Weah in 1996. The tightest call ever was in 2010, when Xavi pipped his Barcelona team-mate Lionel Messi by just 1.7% of the vote, and Messi was on the other side of a close call in 2019 when edging out Liverpool defender Virgil van Dijk.

But this year's contest between Lamine Yamal and Ousmane Dembele was won by the very barest of margins.

As always, we asked our panellists to rank their top five players of the year, with five voting points awarded to their top pick, four to the second, and so on.

Clean sweep...Luis Enrique and his Paris Saint-Germain players celebrate with the Champions League trophy after finally conquering Europe

***World Soccer* Player of the Year...Paris Saint-Germain and France forward Ousmane Dembele**

Previous World Player of the Year winners

1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
1982 Paolo Rossi	**1990 Lothar Matthaus**	**2000 Luis Figo**	**2010 Xavi**
Juventus & Italy	*Internazionale & West Germany*	*Barcelona/Real Madrid & Portugal*	*Barcelona & Spain*
1983 Zico	**1991 Jean-Pierre Papin**	**2001 Michael Owen**	**2011 Lionel Messi**
Udinese & Brazil	*Marseille & France*	*Liverpool & England*	*Barcelona & Argentina*
1984 Michel Platini	**1992 Marco van Basten**	**2002 Ronaldo**	**2012 Lionel Messi**
Juventus & France	*Milan & Netherlands*	*Internazionale/Real Madrid & Brazil*	*Barcelona & Argentina*
1985 Michel Platini	**1993 Roberto Baggio**	**2003 Pavel Nedved**	**2013 Cristiano Ronaldo**
Juventus & France	*Juventus & Italy*	*Juventus & Czech Republic*	*Real Madrid & Portugal*
1986 Diego Maradona	**1994 Paolo Maldini**	**2004 Ronaldinho**	**2014 Cristiano Ronaldo**
Napoli & Argentina	*Milan & Italy*	*Barcelona & Brazil*	*Real Madrid & Portugal*
1987 Ruud Gullit	**1995 Gianluca Vialli**	**2005 Ronaldinho**	**2015 Lionel Messi**
PSV/Milan & Netherlands	*Juventus & Italy*	*Barcelona & Brazil*	*Barcelona & Argentina*
1988 Marco van Basten	**1996 Ronaldo**	**2006 Fabio Cannavaro**	**2016 Cristiano Ronaldo**
Milan & Netherlands	*PSV/Barcelona & Brazil*	*Juventus/Real Madrid & Italy*	*Real Madrid & Portugal*
1989 Ruud Gullit	**1997 Ronaldo**	**2007 Kaka**	**2017 Cristiano Ronaldo**
Milan & Netherlands	*Barcelona/Internazionale & Brazil*	*Milan & Brazil*	*Real Madrid & Portugal*
	1998 Zinedine Zidane	**2008 Cristiano Ronaldo**	**2018 Luka Modric**
	Juventus & France	*Manchester United & Portugal*	*Real Madrid & Croatia*
	1999 Rivaldo	**2009 Lionel Messi**	**2019 Lionel Messi**
	Barcelona & Brazil	*Barcelona & Argentina*	*Barcelona & Argentina*

As the votes came in, the two leaders were neck and neck all the way. But ultimately, with a healthy quota of top votes, Dembele claimed the honour.

At 18 years of age, Yamal would have been the first teenager to win the award – Brazilian Ronaldo, aged 20 in 1996, remains the youngest-ever winner – but the Spanish winger has now featured prominently among the votes two years in a row and his time will come again.

Behind him came a closely-packed cluster of players, including Dembele's PSG team-mates Vitinha and Achraf Hakimi and Yamal's fellow Barca winger Raphinha. European Golden Shoe winner Kylian Mbappe (more on page 50), Premier League champion Mo Salah, and the hugely prolific Erling Haaland and Harry Kane (more on page 47) were also in contention and, with good World Cups, will be so again next year.

In contrast, the Men's Manager and Team of the Year awards were open and shut cases, with Champions League-winning Luis Enrique and PSG streaking clear of the competition.

The 2025 women's awards were almost a mirror image of the men's, with a tight race for the Player of the Year and comfortable victories in the manager and team categories.

Aitana Bonmati, winner of this award for the previous two years, is always in contention for individual honours but missing out on the top European prize for both club and country cost her the hat-trick. England's Alessia Russo did get her hands on the Champions League and the European Championship trophies, but even that wasn't quite enough to edge out her Arsenal team-mate Mariona Caldentey.

The Spain midfielder, who moved to North London from Barcelona in 2024, has now won the Champions League three years in a row with two different clubs, and came close to the perfect year after opening the scoring against England in the Euro 2025 final. But Sarina Wiegman's side, as they so often have over the years, found a way to bounce back and win that final and, in a repeat of 2022, claimed the Women's Manager and Team of the Year awards.

Jamie Evans

2020s

2020 Robert Lewandowski
Bayern Munich & Poland
2021 Robert Lewandowski
Bayern Munich & Poland
2022 Lionel Messi
Paris Saint-Germain & Argentina
2023 Erling Haaland
Manchester City & Norway
2024 Rodri
Manchester City & Spain

2025 WINNERS

MEN'S WORLD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	Ousmane Dembele *PSG & France*	93
2	Lamine Yamal *Barcelona & Spain*	91
3	Vitinha *PSG & Portugal*	42
4=	Mohamed Salah *Liverpool & Egypt*	26
4=	Erling Haaland *Manchester City & Norway*	26
6=	Harry Kane *Bayern Munich & England*	24
6=	Achraf Hakimi *PSG & Morocco*	24
8	Raphinha *Barcelona & Brazil*	23
9	Kylian Mbappe *Real Madrid & France*	21
10	Nuno Mendes *PSG & Portugal*	8
11	Scott McTominay *Napoli & Scotland*	6
12	Pedri *Barcelona & Spain*	5
13=	Desire Doue *PSG & France*	4
13=	Gianluigi Donnarumma *PSG/Manchester City & Italy*	4
13=	Lautaro Martinez *Internazionale & Argentina*	4
13=	Moises Caicedo *Chelsea & Ecuador*	4
17	Luka Modric *Real Madrid/Milan & Croatia*	3
18=	Almoez Ali *Al Duhail & Qatar*	2
18=	Cole Palmer *Chelsea & England*	2
18=	Rodri *Manchester City & Spain*	2
21=	N'Golo Kante *Al Ittihad & France*	1
21=	Salem Al Dawsari *Al Hilal & Saudi Arabia*	1
21=	Thiago Silva *Fluminense & Brazil*	1
21=	Vinicius Junior *Real Madrid & Brazil*	1
21=	Lionel Messi *Inter Miami & Argentina*	1
21=	Jude Bellingham *Real Madrid & England*	1

MEN'S MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	Luis Enrique *Paris Saint-Germain*	124
2	Arne Slot *Liverpool*	37
3	Hansi Flick *Barcelona*	30
4	Mikel Arteta *Arsenal*	11
5=	Pep Guardiola *Manchester City*	8
5=	Antonio Conte *Napoli*	8
7=	Simone Inzaghi *Internazionale/Al Hilal*	6
7=	Enzo Maresca *Chelsea*	6
9	Bubista *Cape Verde*	5
10=	Oliver Glasner *Crystal Palace*	3
10=	Roberto Martinez *Portugal*	3
10=	Jamal Sellami *Jordan*	3
13	Vincent Kompany *Bayern Munich*	2
14=	Lionel Scaloni *Argentina*	1
14=	Stale Solbakken *Norway*	1
14=	Timur Kapadze *Uzbekistan*	1
14=	Javier Aguirre *Mexico*	1
14=	Anders Torstensson *Mjallby*	1
14=	Dick Advocaat *Curacao*	1

MEN'S TEAM OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	Paris Saint-Germain	131
2	Liverpool	41
3	Barcelona	33
4	Chelsea	14
5	Mjallby	5
6	Napoli	4
7=	Norway	3
7=	Portugal	3
7=	Jordan	3
7=	Fluminense	3
7=	Morocco	3
12=	Real Madrid	2
12=	Bayern Munich	2
14=	Spain	1
14=	Al Hilal	1
14=	Cape Verde	1
14=	Tunisia	1
14=	Pyramids	1

WOMEN'S WORLD PLAYER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	Mariona Caldentey *Arsenal & Spain*	44
2	Alessia Russo *Arsenal & England*	38
3	Aitana Bonmati *Barcelona & Spain*	30
4	Alexia Putellas *Barcelona & Spain*	18
5	Patri Guijarro *Barcelona & Spain*	15
6	Temwa Chawinga *Kansas City Current & Malawi*	14
7	Hannah Hampton *Chelsea & England*	12
8	Chloe Kelly *Manchester City/Arsenal & England*	8
9	Leah Williamson *Arsenal & England*	7
10	Lucy Bronze *Chelsea & England*	6
11	Barbra Banda *Orlando Pride & Zambia*	5
12=	Kim Little *Arsenal & Scotland*	3
12=	Klara Buhl *Bayern Munich & Germany*	3
12=	Cristiana Girelli *Juventus & Italy*	3
15	Tabitha Chawinga *OL Lyonnes & Malawi*	2
16	Ghizlane Chebbak *Levante Badalona/Al Hilal & Morocco*	1

WOMEN'S WORLD MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	Sarina Wiegman *England*	58
2	Renee Slegers *Arsenal*	33
3	Sonia Bompastor *Chelsea*	19
4	Andrea Soncin *Italy*	5
5	Justine Madugu *Nigeria*	4
6	Angelo Marsiglia *Colombia*	3
7=	Lamia Boumehdi *TP Mazembe*	1
7=	Arthur Elias *Brazil*	1
7=	Pere Romeu *Barcelona*	1
7=	Bev Yanez *Racing Louisville*	1

WOMEN'S WORLD TEAM OF THE YEAR

Rank	Name	Total
1	England	51
2	Arsenal	27
3	Chelsea	14
4=	Spain	6
4=	Nigeria	6
4=	Kansas City Current	6
7=	TP Mazembe	5
7=	Barcelona	5
9=	Orlando Pride	3
9=	Brazil	3

THE VOTING PANEL

AFRICA
Emmanuel Ayamga
Mark Gleeson
Alasdair Howorth
Oluwashina Okeleji

ASIA
John Duerden
Adel Ferdowsipour
Mike Plastow
Neel Shelat
Mike Tuckerman

CONCACAF
Martin del Palacio Langer
Lasana Liburd
John Molinaro
James Nalton

EUROPE/UK
Paddy Agnew
Guillem Balague
Nick Bidwell
Peterjon Cresswell
Luke Entwistle
Jim Holden
Tom Kundert
Samindra Kunti
Sam Matterface
Steve Menary
Vladimir Novak
Keir Radnedge
Henry Winter

SOUTH AMERICA
Vicente Dattoli
Tim Vickery
Carl Worswick

OCEANIA
Michael Burgess

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
Rachel Brown-Finnis
Asif Burhan
Robyn Cowen
Rich Laverty
Sophie Lawson
Adam Millington
Glenn Moore
Suzanne Wrack

PLAYER

OUSMANE DEMBELE

Men's World Player of the Year

It is not unusual for the *World Soccer* Player and Manager of the Year to come from the same club, but it is not always the case that the success of each is so dependent on the other. In 2025, Luis Enrique unlocked a level of consistency from Ousmane Dembele that no other manager has been able to, while Dembele became the face and the focal point of the Spaniard's Champions League-winning team.

In the eyes of most observers, the departure of Kylian Mbappe in the summer of 2024 resembled something of a disaster for Paris Saint-Germain. For coach Luis Enrique, it presented an opportunity. An opportunity to build a team with more cohesion, more energy, and one not solely focused on providing a platform for its most high-profile player.

It also provided an opportunity for another player to fill Mbappe's boots, not just as the team's talisman but also as its centre-forward. That opportunity fell to Dembele

"We knew Ousmane as a winger but we see that he is really capable of going anywhere and that is completely positive," said Enrique during last season. "Where last season we saw him start from the wing, [now] we see him acting more as a No.9.

"He is always where he needs to be, he is then able to receive a ball and score with one touch."

Those words came in early February, when Dembele's transformation from mercurial winger to clinical striker had

European champion...Dembele clutches the Champions League trophy

Another goal ...Dembele nets against Liverpool at Anfield in March

Silencing the critics ...Dembele celebrates scoring v Arsenal in last season's Champions League

become clear. After a solid but unspectacular start to the season, with five goals by the first week of December, Dembele exploded just in time for the New Year. "You'd have to ask him what he ate at Christmas," added Luis Enrique after his striker had just scored his 18th goal in ten matches.

A 2025 Dembele highlights reel is not noticeably different from any other year of his career. There is still the balance, the deft footwork, the trickery, the changes of pace or direction that leave defenders tackling thin air. There are the spectacular goals, off either foot – indeed, it's still not clear which one he prefers. But now there are also other goals: close-range goals, scruffy goals, composed goals, even a couple of headed goals. There are certainly more goals – more than ever, in fact: 35 in total for 2024-25, and 28 in 38 games for the calendar year at the time of writing (and counting).

Just as important, though, are the moments that don't make the highlights. Instead of the moping, drifting, anonymousness of the past, there is now energy, leadership and purpose. Paris Saint-Germain were the best team in the world during 2024-25 (more on that on the next page) and Dembele was their poster boy, their best and most effective attacker, the personification of rich potential finally knuckling down and getting its act together.

Players plying their trade in France tend to be overlooked for football's individual prizes. Although Lionel Messi was *World Soccer* Player of the Year for 2022, that was recognition of his World Cup-winning exploits for Argentina rather than what he did at PSG. Before that, you have to go all the way back to 1991 for the last French-based player to win this award. Jean-Pierre Papin was a Ligue 1 champion and the league's top scorer, but it was his role in leading Marseille to the European Cup final and France through qualifying for Euro '92 with a 100% record that earned him the honour.

The same is true now as it was then: Ligue 1 success does not lead to global acclaim. Dembele's return of 21 goals in the French league last season was nothing special – Mbappe struck more in five of the previous six campaigns in France – but his Champions League form was exceptional. Eight goals and six assists en route to the trophy only tells half the story; the timing of the goals was key. The first came shortly after he'd come off the bench against Manchester City with his side 2-0 down at home, sparking a comeback that resulted in a 4-2 win. Next, he struck a hat-trick in a 4-1 win against Stuttgart that secured passage to the knockout rounds, and he was on target again in the play-off against Brest. He found the back of the net twice at Anfield against Liverpool in the last 16, once during the game and again during the shootout, then set up goals in each leg of the quarter-final with Aston Villa. Goal number eight came against Arsenal in the semi-final and even in the final, when Desire Doue hogged the spotlight and the Player of the Match award, Dembele still set up two of the five PSG goals.

On top of those numbers, he set the tone for this most energetic and enterprising of teams, running, linking, pressing from the front, elevating PSG to more than the sum of their expensively assembled parts for the first time ever.

Is there more to come? Hopefully, although his start to the 2025-26 campaign has been interrupted by a hamstring injury, probably not helped by spending the summer in the United States at the Club World Cup. He has work to do for the national team, having scored just once in four appearances in 2025, where the question of how he lines up alongside national team captain Mbappe is not clear.

Yet 2025 will always remain Dembele's and PSG's year.

Jamie Evans

Paris Saint-Germain were the best team in the world during 2024-25 and Dembele was their poster boy, their best and most effective attacker, the personification of rich potential finally getting its act together

FACT FILE

Age *28 (15.05.1997)*
Club *Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)*
Country *France*
Previous clubs *Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund, Rennes*
2025 Honours *Ligue 1, French Cup, Trophee des Champions, Champions League, UEFA Super Cup*

MANAGER/TEAM

LUIS ENRIQUE & PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

Men's World Manager of the Year, Men's World Team of the Year

When the last of the *Galacticos*, Kylian Mbappe, departed Paris Saint-Germain, Luis Enrique insisted that he had been replaced by "16 stars": the starting XI and the five substitutes that he was able to bring on. That discourse was consistent throughout last season, frequently mimicked by club president Nasser Al Khelaifi. "The star is the collective," Al Khelaifi would frequently proclaim. But it wasn't just the "stars" on the pitch that took *Les Parisiens* to their historic Champions League success.

The collective that took PSG to the European crown, the Ligue 1 title for the fourth successive season (and at a canter), the French Cup, and the Trophee des Champions, included not just the players but the manager, the assistants, the sporting director and the medical staff. All played a role in turning this side into the best in Europe.

Luis Enrique is always reluctant to talk about individuals in what he frequently highlights is a team sport, recently going so far to say that he is "worried" about the extent to which the media have spoken about the individuals and their respective awards. He would not be drawn on Ousmane Dembele winning the Ballon d'Or or Desire Doue picking up the Golden Boy trophy for Europe's best young player, but both were excellent in 2025.

Dembele was nothing short of a revelation. Luis Enrique's decision to repurpose him as a central striker proved inspired. But against Italians Internazionale in the Champions League final, it was Doue who picked up the baton, netting a brace and earning the rarest of compliments: a 10/10 rating from *L'Equipe*.

Manager of the Year...Luis Enrique

In midfield there was Vitinha, whose success and influence can not be disassociated from that of his excellent midfield partners, Joao Neves and Fabian Ruiz. In Achraf Hakimi and Nuno Mendes, PSG have arguably the best two full-backs in world football, while Gianluigi Donnarumma, now at Manchester City, was in the Champions League Team of the Season.

Squad-building has been one of PSG's greatest strengths and for that the credit lies with sporting director Luis Campos. Seven of the starting XI in the 5-0 win over Inter were Campos signings. He has revolutionised this squad, instigating and overseeing a much-needed strategy shift.

Campos constructed the only

PREVIOUS WINNERS

WORLD MANAGER OF THE YEAR

1982 Enzo Bearzot, *Italy*
1983 Sepp Piontek, *Denmark*
1984 Michel Hidalgo, *France*
1985 Terry Venables, *Barcelona*
1986 Guy Thys, *Belgium*
1987 Johan Cruyff, *Ajax*
1988 Rinus Michels, *Netherlands/Bayer Leverkusen*
1989 Arrigo Sacchi, *Milan*
1990 Franz Beckenbauer, *West Germany/Marseille*
1991 Michel Platini, *France*
1992 Richard Moller Nielsen, *Denmark*
1993 Alex Ferguson, *Man. United*
1994 Carlos Alberto Parreira, *Brazil*
1995 Louis van Gaal, *Ajax*
1996 Berti Vogts, *Germany*
1997 Ottmar Hitzfeld, *B. Dortmund*
1998 Arsene Wenger, *Arsenal*
1999 Alex Ferguson, *Man. United*
2000 Dino Zoff, *Italy*
2001 Gerard Houllier, *Liverpool*
2002 Guus Hiddink, *South Korea/PSV*
2003 Carlo Ancelotti, *Milan*
2004 Jose Mourinho, *Porto/Chelsea*
2005 Jose Mourinho, *Chelsea*
2006 Marcello Lippi, *Italy*
2007 Alex Ferguson, *Man. United*
2008 Alex Ferguson, *Man. United*
2009 Pep Guardiola, *Barcelona*
2010 Jose Mourinho, *Internazionale/Real Madrid*
2011 Pep Guardiola, *Barcelona*
2012 Vicente del Bosque, *Spain*
2013 Jupp Heynckes, *Bayern Munich*
2014 Joachim Low, *Germany*
2015 Luis Enrique, *Barcelona*
2016 Claudio Ranieri, *Leicester City*
2017 Zinedine Zidane, *Real Madrid*
2018 Didier Deschamps, *France*
2019 Jurgen Klopp, *Liverpool*
2020 Hansi Flick, *Bayern Munich*
2021 Roberto Mancini, *Italy*
2022 Lionel Scaloni, *Argentina*
2023 Pep Guardiola, *Man. City*
2024 Carlo Ancelotti, *Real Madrid*

two sides, Lille and Monaco, to have denied *Les Parisiens* the Ligue 1 title in the last ten years, so seemed the logical recruit when they overhauled their backroom staff. But it was the Portuguese director's first time working at a so-called "elite" club. Never before had he had such extraordinary financial means at his disposal.

Campos' predecessors weren't afraid to splash the cash but, put simply, they got things wrong. The likes of Lionel Messi, Neymar, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Sergio Ramos and Edinson Cavani were all very, in the words of Al Khelaifi, "bling-bling", but they didn't take PSG to the heights of 2025.

The *Galactico* strategy lived in the past, and PSG, by extension, were a club living in the past. But they now exist on the cutting edge. Campos, through a strategy that continues to evolve and which will place an increased importance on youth development going forward, ensures that.

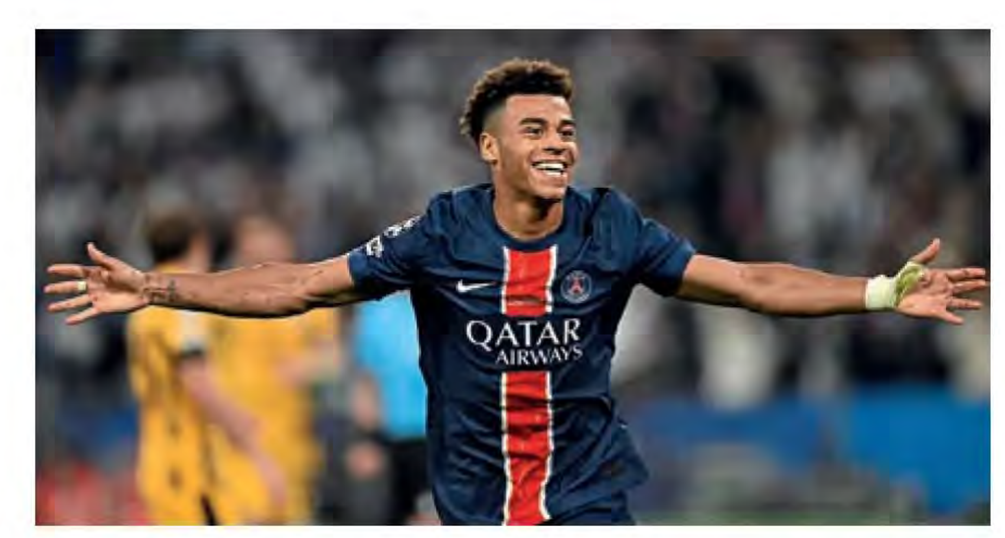
Luis Enrique has also put PSG there. When his limp and stale Spain side crashed out of the World Cup in 2022, it looked as though the game may have passed him by. But he has the capacity for reinvention, and his side practise the most flowing, high-intensity, high-pressing, modern and expressive football in the world.

And he is evolving, too. He has been influenced by rugby, using kick-offs to boot the ball into the opposition corner in order to ensure territorial dominance, allowing his side to exert their death-by-possession approach. In the first half of home matches, you'll find him high in the stands, getting a bird's-eye view, allowing him to better visualise the game, mimicking a director of rugby.

The final credits go to the medical team, who kept this squad fit all year. Defender Presnel Kimpembe had been injured since 2023 and barely played, *Les Bleus* international Lucas Hernandez was recovering from an ACL injury suffered in the previous season, and Portugal striker Goncalo Ramos picked up an injury on the opening day of the season. But bar those injuries, only three players – Marquinhos (three), Warren Zaire-Emery (four) and Senny Mayulu (four) – missed more than two league games all season. Luis Enrique had a full armoury at his disposal all season and he used it to devastating effect.

After more than a decade of QSI ownership, the parts of the puzzle all fell into place in 2025, coalescing to form Europe's newest powerhouse.

Luke Entwistle



Champions League Player of the Match ...Desire Doue

The likes of Lionel Messi, Neymar, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Sergio Ramos and Edinson Cavani were all very, in the words of Al Khelaifi, "bling-bling", but they didn't take PSG to the heights of 2025

PREVIOUS WINNERS

WORLD TEAM OF THE YEAR

1982 *Brazil*
1983 *Hamburg*
1984 *France*
1985 *Everton*
1986 *Argentina*
1987 *Porto*
1988 *Netherlands*
1989 *Milan*
1990 *West Germany*
1991 *France*
1992 *Denmark*
1993 *Parma*
1994 *Milan*
1995 *Ajax*
1996 *Nigeria*
1997 *Borussia Dortmund*
1998 *France*
1999 *Manchester United*
2000 *France*
2001 *Liverpool*
2002 *Brazil*
2003 *Milan*
2004 *Greece*
2005 *Liverpool*
2006 *Barcelona*
2007 *Iraq*
2008 *Spain*
2009 *Barcelona*
2010 *Spain*
2011 *Barcelona*
2012 *Spain*
2013 *Bayern Munich*
2014 *Germany*
2015 *Barcelona*
2016 *Leicester City*
2017 *Real Madrid*
2018 *France*
2019 *Liverpool*
2020 *Bayern Munich*
2021 *Italy*
2022 *Argentina*
2023 *Manchester City*
2024 *Spain*

Team of the Year... Paris Saint-Germain

WOMEN

MARIONA CALDENTEY

Women's World Player of the Year

It was the sequel to the 2023 World Cup final: Spain v England in the decider of the 2025 Women's European Championship. Would the Lionesses get revenge for that defeat, or would *La Roja* reaffirm their status as the world's outstanding team?

The tournament once again shone a light on this outstanding generation of Spanish talent: their gilded midfield of Alexia Putellas, Patri Guijarro and Aitana Bonmati, their captain and defensive rock Irene Paredes, and veteran striker Esther Gonzalez, the competition's leading goalscorer.

Yet only one of them was pursuing a rare double, attempting to become a European champion for both club and country. Mariona Caldentey had already lifted the Champions League trophy a month earlier, overcoming many of her international team-mates by helping Arsenal beat Barcelona in the final, and now she was aiming to follow that up with Spain.

In the 25th minute, she announced herself. After a typically flowing Spanish move down the right flank, a cross from Ona Batlle was floated into the box and Caldentey's eyes lit up. Reacting quicker than her marker and former Barca colleague Lucy Bronze, Caldentey pounced, powering a header past Hannah Hampton in the England goal.

Sadly for her it was not enough. Alessia Russo, her fellow Arsenal star, equalised in the second half as England went on to win on penalties. This time, Caldentey had to settle for a silver medal.

It was a rare downside in an exceptional year for the versatile midfielder. Much like the climate of her hometown of Felanitx in Mallorca, she has warmed to every challenge that 2025 has had to offer.

Starring for Arsenal in the Women's Super League, Caldentey's performances have made her a regular since moving to North London from Barcelona in July 2024.

"Playing in England, for a club like Arsenal, massively excited me", she told *ESPN* of her move to London. "I thought I could grow and discover more about myself, professionally and personally."

Player of the Year... Mariona Caldentey

True to her words, Caldentey hit nine goals and assisted five in 21 matches during her debut WSL season. The more in-depth statistics – open-play xG assists and open-play key passes – demonstrated that she was among the league's most creative players.

The Gunners finished in second place behind champions Chelsea, but Caldentey was recognised as the league's best player by collecting both the WSL Player of the Season and PFA Player of the Year awards.

"She's a total footballer for me," her club boss Renee Slegers told *Arseblog*. She's got everything...intelligence, technical abilities, an extremely high work rate. She's a winner."

Slegers hit the nail on the head. As well as being an effective goalscorer, Caldentey has operated well in a variety of positions. In a testament to her adaptability, she was selected in the PFA Team of the Year as a left-winger, and the Champions League Team of the Season in midfield.

She certainly thrived on the European stage. Caldentey scored seven goals in the 2024-25 UEFA Women's Champions League – only one player scored more – as Arsenal won the competition for the first time since 2007. It was her strike in the 4-1 semi-final comeback win against Lyon that earned her the Champions League Goal of the Season award and helped set up the clash with her former team in the final.

Caldentey spent a decade at Barcelona between 2014 and 2024, scoring 113 goals in 302 appearances, and playing a pivotal role in the team's attack. She played her part in six league title wins, five Copas de la Reina, and three Champions Leagues. It was off the back of the treble-winning campaign of 2023-24, when her performances saw her nominated for the Best FIFA Women's Player award, that she decided to spread her wings and take on a new challenge.

But like any great success story, there have been some low moments along the way. Her father Miguel Angel, a football coach in Felanitx who

> "Playing in England, for a club like Arsenal, massively excited me. I thought I could grow and discover more about myself, professionally and personally"
>
> **Mariona Caldentey**

Caldentey has described as one of her biggest supporters and influences, passed away in 2018. He was not able to witness his daughter winning her first Champions League trophy in 2021 or becoming a world champion with Spain in 2023. Football, she says, helped provide an escape from her grief.

What's next? More trophies, she hopes. She ended the year on a high by winning the UEFA Nations League with Spain, and while Arsenal have been off the pace in the first half of the WSL, and have plenty of work to do to retain their European crown, with Caldentey's magic to call upon they are capable of beating anyone – as they proved in 2025.

Gina Bagnulo

Opening goal... Caldentey scores in the Euro 2025 final

FACT FILE

Age *29 (19.03.1996)*
Club *Arsenal (Eng)* **Country** *Spain*
Previous clubs *Barcelona, Collerense*
2025 Honours *Champions League, UEFA Nations League*

PREVIOUS WINNERS

Women's World Player of the Year

2020 Pernille Harder, *Wolfsburg/Chelsea & Denmark*
2021 Alexia Putellas, *Barcelona & Spain*
2022 Beth Mead, *Arsenal & England*
2023 Aitana Bonmati, *Barcelona & Spain*
2024 Aitana Bonmati, *Barcelona & Spain*

Champions League winner...Caldentey raises the trophy

MANAGER/TEAM

SARINA WIEGMAN & ENGLAND

Women's World Manager of the Year, Women's World Team of the Year

There has rarely been a better illustration of how success in elite sport often comes down to moments, and how players and coaches react to them, than England's Euro 2025 triumph.

Were England the best team of the year? Many would argue not, given that they lost to Belgium, Spain, France and Brazil in 2025. Even at the Euros they only won two of their seven games inside 90 minutes, and in six hours of knockout football they led for just four minutes.

But when it mattered they stood up and performed, showing a resilience that has often eluded England teams – men and women – in the past.

Much of the credit for that must go to a Dutchwoman, their coach Sarina Wiegman, whose calmness percolated onto the pitch and whose decision-making under pressure proved to be the difference time and again.

Wiegman has put together an extraordinary body of work, featuring in the dugout in the last five major finals at the European Championship and World Cup. The former her team has won on each occasion, the latter they have lost. The next step for both her and for England is to win a World Cup final, and they have Brazil 2027 firmly in their sights.

The path may not be as smooth as expected, not least as England have been drawn with regular rivals Spain in their qualifying group, from which only one team progresses automatically. While a play-off ought to hold few fears, it would add an unnecessary complication.

Not that Wiegman seems perturbed by complications; she calmly negotiated a series of them in winning the Euros.

The first problems came before a ball had even been kicked. Goalkeeper Mary Earps and defender Millie Bright, two pillars of the previous success in 2022, both withdrew on the eve of the tournament. The full extent of the damage only became clear later. Bright went on to retire from international football altogether citing burnout while Earps, in an ill-advised autobiography, detailed her dismay at Wiegman's preference for Hannah Hampton in goal and described a breakdown of her relationship with the coach.

But by the time of the second game of the Euros, after England had stuttered to an opening defeat to France, it became clear that Wiegman, as usual, had made the right decision. Hampton, with laser-like accuracy, created two of the goals in England's 4-0 dispatch of the Netherlands.

Manager of the Year ...Sarina Wiegman with the European Championship trophy

In the knockout stages the mettle of Wiegman and her players was tested again. England were seemingly heading for defeat against Sweden in the quarter-finals before decisive substitutions completely changed the game, notably that of Michelle Agyemang. That earned England a penalty shootout in which Hampton again shone.

The semi-final against Italy was also fraught. Agyemang again came off the bench to turn the game around with an eye-catching cameo, before another substitute, Chloe Kelly, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat by following up her 119th-minute penalty miss.

By this stage it was easy to argue that England had fluked their way into the final but good teams and good coaches tend to find a way. While there were sometimes questions about Wiegman's starting XI, her in-game management had twice rescued England. Moreover, the calmness and belief she exudes from the touchline and in the dressing room enabled her players to continue to believe when few spectators still did, and helped them remain calm amid the intense pressure.

Those qualities were again in evidence in the final as England battled their way back against world champions Spain, before winning another penalty shootout with Kelly inevitably the match-winner. "Proper English" was how the players chose to describe their resilient achievement but there was "proper Dutch" too. Wiegman has the blunt honesty so typical of her nationality but also a warmth that draws the best from her players.

Game changer ...Wiegman gives instructions to Chloe Kelly before bringing her on during the Euro 2025 final

> When it mattered England stood up and performed, showing a resilience that has often eluded England teams – men and women – in the past. Much of the credit for that must go to Sarina Wiegman

It will be interesting to see how she copes without her countryman Arjan Veurink alongside her. He has been present as her assistant for all her European and World Cup campaigns but is now head coach of the Netherlands national team.

She has, however, proved as adept as her players at overcoming challenges and peaking when it matters.

Now 56, she began playing football in the streets of the Hague half a century ago, a time when it was inconceivable that she would one day find herself dancing with a Nigerian rapper on a stage outside Buckingham Palace, cheered on by 65,000 English fans, as she did with Burna Boy during the Lionesses' victory celebrations.

Just for once Wiegman was discombobulated. "I was very flabbergasted," she admitted. But as so often on the touchline she quickly regained her composure and seized the moment.

Glenn Moore

PREVIOUS WINNERS

Women's World Manager of the Year

2020 Jean-Luc Vasseur, ***Lyon***
2021 Lluis Cortes, ***Barcelona***
2022 Sarina Wiegman, ***England***
2023 Sarina Wiegman, ***England***
2024 Emma Hayes, ***Chelsea/USA***

Women's World Team of the Year

2020 Lyon
2021 Barcelona
2022 England
2023 Spain
2024 Barcelona

Team of the Year... the Lionesses lift the Euro 2025 trophy

PLAYER

JESS FISHLOCK

Wales Women's greatest-ever player hangs up her boots

One would think that lifting multiple league titles in five different countries, twice winning the UEFA Champions League, being voted into the National Women's Soccer League Team of the Season five times, and being crowned the NWSL Most Valuable Player in 2021 would be enough. And yet the look of uncomplicated euphoria on Jess Fishlock's face as she became the first Welsh woman to score at a major international tournament at Euro 2025 in Switzerland suggested otherwise. Wales had equalised against France with less than quarter of an hour gone, following a sobering 3-0 defeat in the opening game against the Netherlands, and although the Dragons would go on to lose all three games of the group stage, Wales' greatest-ever female footballer had ticked another thing off her career bucket list.

It is undisputed that Fishlock is the best footballer to ever play for the Welsh women's team – the highest profile, the most capped, and the record goalscorer, with a tally of 48 goals in 166 games from midfield. Growing up in the working-class suburb of Llanrumney, east Cardiff, her mishmash accent is a conspicuous indicator of her footballing ambition. After making her debut for Cardiff City Ladies at the age of 15, Fishlock always travelled to play the game at the highest level, having had spells in England, the Netherlands, Australia, Scotland, Germany, France and the United States. But it's her unfaltering commitment to representing her country that most endears her to Welsh supporters, as well as the constant reassurance that with Fishlock in the side, Wales had a difference maker on the pitch who was capable of unlocking the steeliest of defences.

"Uncomplicated euphoria"...Fishlock celebrates scoring v France at Euro 2025

A legend's send-off ...Fishlock after her final international

Having announced her retirement from the international game at the age of 38, 19 years after making her debut, Fishlock's time in a red shirt provides a lens through which to view the game's development in her home country. Extraordinarily, she has played in 67% of the team's fixtures since the women's team was officially established by the Football Association of Wales in 1993. Her career as an international spans the era of having to play in men's kits in front of a few hundred curious spectators, to the success of qualifying for a major international tournament and an exodus of thousands of Welsh fans to support the team in Switzerland.

There is of course, much progress to be made for women's football in Wales. And yet Fishlock's last hurrah as an international player was loaded with significance. Shortly before the Euros began she had a full-size pitch mural dedicated to her in Cardiff, the first full-size pitch mural dedicated to a female footballer in Europe. In her final game against Australia, she was given a rapturous send off by 11,000 supporters, an inconceivable attendance for a friendly even five years ago. Mared Griffiths, Wales' goalscorer in a 2-1 defeat to the Matildas, was born the year after Fishlock made her debut for Wales. The Welsh team is in transition. How an icon is replaced remains to be seen.

Elis James

Extraordinarily, she has played in 67% of Wales' fixtures since the team was officially established by the Football Association of Wales in 1993

COACH

BUBISTA

Head coach behind Cape Verde's remarkable World Cup qualification

Pedro Leitao Brito, or the much simpler "Bubista", engineered one of the biggest shocks in the African game, and World Cup qualifying history, by taking the tiny Cape Verde to the 2026 finals at the expense of Cameroon, who have been to more World Cups than any other African nation.

The Cape Verde head coach, who turns 56 in January 2026, has forged a formidable selection. While he has profited from the large Cape Verdean diaspora across Europe, he has also had to show deft man management skills by blending a group with heritage in common but often not much else. He has players born on the island mixed with those from the migrant communities in France, the Netherlands and Portugal, plus an Irishman, the Shamrock Rovers captain Roberto Lopes.

"I put a lot of importance on human relationships. Yes, we have players who have Cape Verdean heritage but are born in different countries," Bubista explains. "The first call-up is almost always to see if a player can fit in with the squad, to acquaint them with their team-mates and coaches, and, above all, for us to get a sense of where their heart is.

"I try to get to know them deep down, more than what you would see on the outside. That way, I know I can depend on them if I call them up in the future."

African Coach of the Year...Bubista was honoured at the 2025 CAF awards

Man manager...Bubista with his players at the last AFCON finals

Managing these disparate elements into an effective winning unit is no easy feat, but Bubista has had the advantage of seeing first-hand the slow transition of the Cape Verde team.

"Back when I was a player and the captain, my dream was for us to win the Amilcar Cabral Cup," he says of the regional tournament that was the only international competition Cape Verde participated in at the turn of the century.

Bubista's debut came in 1995 in the tournament in Mauritania, and he would go on to captain the *Tubaroes Azuis* (Blue Sharks) until his last game in 2005. He played centre-back, briefly playing in the Spanish second tier before signing for the Angolan airline club AS Aviacao and staying there for six years. He had one more go at Europe, Estoril in the Portuguese second division, but again it didn't last long and he ended his playing career back home with Falcoes do Norte.

Bubista transitioned quickly from playing to coaching with the national team, serving as assistant to Joao de Deus and Lucio Antunes. He had a three-year break in charge of clubs in the domestic championship before returning as assistant in 2016 under Rui Aguas, whom he replaced in 2020.

The last five years have seen massive progress, and now with their place at the World Cup secured, Bubista says Cape Verde need to take the next step.

"We reached the World Cup through talent and unity; to continue competing, we need structure and dignity. We have talent, but that's not enough. We need better conditions, more fields, and youth teams competing regularly, so that our young people can dream of reaching the national team.

"This qualification is an inspiration for new generations of Cape Verdean players. We value local talents, but we will now be seen as an emerging power in football. We have to do everything we can to make this qualification a turning point for everything our football deserves."

Mark Gleeson

> "This qualification is an inspiration for new generations of Cape Verdean players"
> Cape Verde coach Bubista

PLAYER

SCOTT McTOMINAY

Scotland and Napoli's acrobatic volley-scoring hero

Iconic goal No.1... McTominay scores his *Scudetto*-winning scissor-kick goal for Napoli v Cagliari

Scoring an iconic, acrobatic volley for his club made Scott McTominay a contender to be one of our People of the Year; doing the exact same thing again for his country made him a certainty.

In May, the Scotland midfielder scored the goal that sealed the Serie A crown for Napoli, a stunning scissor-kick in a 2-0 win over Cagliari. It was one of those moments that separates top-level footballers from mere mortals; the imagination to conceive of the strike, the athleticism to reach the ball, the technique to perfectly time the contact, and the character to deliver for his team in a crucial moment.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the goal, though, was that he managed to better it six months later.

Maybe the stakes were even higher for the World Cup qualifier against Denmark, with the prospect of Scotland's first finals appearance since McTominay was in nappies on the line. Maybe the nerves were higher, with a packed-out Hampden Park desperate for success but so emotionally scarred by previous failures. Certainly the ball was higher, a full eight feet from the ground as McTominay flung himself towards it.

The photographs of the goal almost don't seem real; a man suspended horizontally in mid-air, his foot pointing skywards at an unnatural height, while the ball fizzes towards the goal. It was the finest volley Hampden had seen since Zinedine Zidane's against Bayer Leverkusen in the 2002 Champions League final – and on a frenetic Glasgow night, no Scot would have swapped their man for the former Real Madrid maestro.

Iconic goal No.2 ...McTominay scores with an outrageous overhead-kick for Scotland v Denmark

If this was simply the Scott McTominay story, the drama would have ended there, with Scotland clinging on for a nerve-jangling 87 minutes to win 1-0. But the Tartan Army aren't used to seeing their national team do things the easy way and the opener was, if not overshadowed, perhaps matched by Kieran Tierney's curler and Kenny McLean's long-range, lobbed clincher.

Yet neither of those players impacted this campaign like McTominay. He was one of three men to play every second, and their best attacker with two goals and an assist. More than that, he led his team-mates, elevated them, showed them they were capable of scaling the heights that he had.

It capped an extraordinary year for a player whose renaissance began in a Scotland shirt two years ago. He had an exceptional 2023 for the national team, scoring seven goals in ten appearances to send them on their way to Euro 2024. It was a run of form that suggested he was a player capable of more than he had shown at Manchester United. A genuine match winner.

Those suspicions were confirmed by a move to Napoli after the Euros. Liberated from the glare of his boyhood club, he thrived in his new surroundings – last April he told *The Athletic* with relish about his love of Italian tomatoes – and quickly established himself as a key cog in Antonio Conte's side.

When Napoli sold star winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia to Paris Saint-Germain in January, McTominay stepped up, becoming a very different kind of talisman for the team. Nine of his 12 Serie A goals in 2024-25 came after the turn of the year, including that stunner against Cagliari. His heroics saw him named the Serie A MVP as the league's best player. He was presented with the Goal of the Month award for that effort, an honour he won again in October for a beautifully-struck half-volley against Internazionale.

As far as Scotland fans are concerned, the one that followed a few weeks later was the goal of the century.

Jamie Evans

McTominay led his team-mates, elevated them, showed them they were capable of scaling the heights that he had

ROUND-UP
PEOPLE OF THE YEAR

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Erling HAALAND

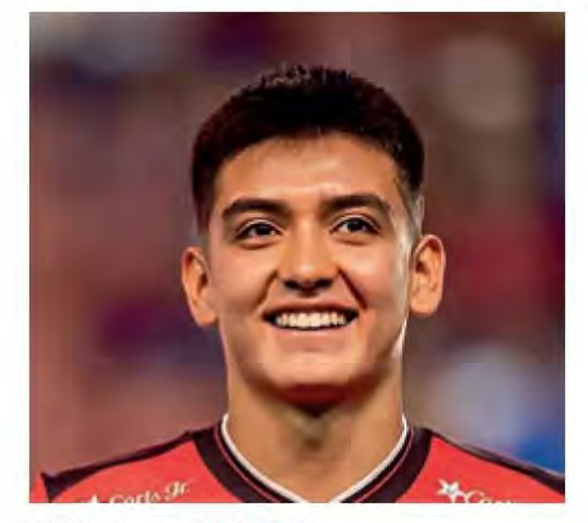
Scored a record-equalling 16 goals in qualifying to send Norway to their first World Cup since 1998. Honourable mention to Troy Parrott, whose five goals in the last two games fired Republic of Ireland to the play-offs.

MARTA

Her status as Brazil's most iconic female player was already secured, but she added to her legacy by coming out of retirement and leading her country to victory in the Copa America Femenina.

Harry KANE

After finally winning his first piece of silverware last season, the Bayern star has shown absolutely no sign of slowing down. Could become England's most capped outfield player at the 2026 World Cup.



Gilberto MORA

Claims the informal title of Wonderkid of the Year for helping Mexico to win the CONCACAF Gold Cup at the age of 16 – beating Pele's record as the youngest player to win a major international trophy.

Fiston MAYELE

An extraordinary year for club and country – led Pyramids to their first CAF Champions League crown with six goals, then scored in the penalty shootout win v Nigeria as DR Congo made it to the World Cup play-offs.

Olivia SMITH

The Canadian forward made history as the first female player to move for a transfer fee of £1 million when she joined Arsenal from WSL rivals Liverpool. PFA Women's Young Player of the Year for 2024-25.

Filipe LUIS

In his first full year as a head coach, the former left-back won the Copa Libertadores, the Brazilian title, the Rio State Championship and the Brazilian Super Cup. The brightest coaching prospect in the country.

Anders TORSTENSSON

The head coach behind Mjallby's remarkable Swedish title victory, leading the village team to the crown despite being diagnosed with a form of leukaemia in 2024. Set for a new role at the club in 2026.

Timur KAPADZE

Stepped up from assistant to lead Uzbekistan to their first World Cup after Srecko Katanec had to step down due to illness, then reverted back to his old role after the Italian Fabio Cannavaro was appointed.

Dick ADVOCAAT

The veteran Dutch coach put himself forward to lead the Curacao national team through World Cup qualifying, and was rewarded with a place at next summer's tournament in North America at the expense of Jamaica.

Jamal SELLAMI

Had a tough act to follow after his fellow Moroccan Hussein Ammouta led Jordan to the final of the Asian Cup in early 2024, but he more than delivered after qualifying the nation for their first-ever World Cup finals.

Fouzi LEKJAA

Head of the Moroccan FA and now one of the most influential figures in not just African football but the world. Under his watch, Morocco have become a serious footballing force both on and off the pitch.

FAREWELL TO...

Jose Araquistain
Real Madrid's goalkeeper in the victorious 1966 European Cup final.

Peter Rufai
Legendary former Nigeria goalkeeper who won 65 caps for the Super Eagles, including at their 1994 AFCON win.

John Clark
One of the "Lisbon Lions", starting in central defence for Celtic's 2-1 win over Internazionale in the 1967 European Cup final.

Matt Beard
Former manager of Liverpool Women in two separate spells, leading the club to back-to-back WSL titles in 2013 and 2014 and then returning to guide them back to the top flight in 2022.

Milan Mandaric
Yugoslav-born Serbian-American businessman who owned or part-owned a number of football clubs including San Jose Earthquakes, Standard Liege, Charleroi, Nice, Portsmouth, Leicester City and Sheffield Wednesday.

Ove Kindvall
One of Sweden's greatest-ever attackers and an iconic star of Dutch football in the 1960s and 1970s.

Leo Beenhakker
A title-winning coach of Ajax, Real Madrid and Feyenoord who also led Trinidad & Tobago to their first-ever World Cup and Poland to their first-ever European Championship finals.

Roger Lukaku
Ex-Zaire striker and father of Belgium internationals Romelu and Jordan.

Aaron Boupendza
Former Gabon striker who was still playing for Chinese side Zhejiang when he passed away in April.

Jorge Costa
Former Portugal international who was the defensive lynchpin and inspirational captain of Jose Mourinho's Porto, lifting the Champions League trophy in 2004.

Premier League champion... Diogo Jota

Diogo Jota
Portugal and Liverpool forward who was tragically killed, along with his brother Andre Silva, in a car crash in Spain.

Juan Ramon Veron
Goalscoring left-winger of the infamous Estudiantes team that won a hat-trick of Copa Libertadores titles between 1968 and 1970. Dubbed *La Bruja* (The Witch), his son Juan Sebastian inherited his nickname – *La Brujita* (The Little Witch).

Denis Law
Arguably Scotland's greatest-ever player, scoring a joint-record 30 goals in 55 appearancess for his country as well as 237 in 404 games for Manchester United.

World Soccer legend ...Brian Glanville

Manchester United icon...Denis Law

Miguel Angel Russo
A legendary player for Estudiantes and a heroic coach for Boca Juniors, leading them to the 2007 Copa Libertadores during one of three spells in charge.

Billy Bonds
West Ham United's record appearance-maker on 799 games, who took over the Hammers' captaincy following the departure of Bobby Moore in 1974.

Willie Young
Scottish defender who reached three consecutive FA Cup finals with Arsenal between 1978 and 1980, lifting the trophy with the Gunners in 1979.

Hugo Gatti
One of Argentina's finest goalkeepers, playing a record 765 Argentine top-flight games and winning two Copas Libertadores with Boca Juniors.

Bernard Lacombe
Outstanding centre-forward in France's home success at the 1984 Euros, who also hit 255 goals in 497 league games for Lyon, Saint-Etienne and Bordeaux.

Brian Glanville
Legendary sports journalist and long-serving *World Soccer* columnist.

Uriah Rennie
Trailblazer who made history as the first black referee in the English Premier League.

Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa
Former club president of Porto, leading the Portuguese side for 42 years and guiding them to 23 league titles.

Doris Fitschen
Nicknamed the "female Beckenbauer" after winning 144 caps and five Euro titles with the German women's team.

Peter McParland
Iconic Aston Villa and Northern Ireland left-winger who scored five goals at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden.

Joey Jones
Wales left-back and two-time European Cup winner with Liverpool in the 1970s.

GOODISON PARK

After the Premier League said goodbye to Everton's historic stadium, *World Soccer* columnist Henry Winter reflected on his many years reporting there

Old and new... an aerial view of Goodison Park, with Everton's new ground in the distance

STADIUM

Everton have performed so poorly at points down the years that we'd joke it was a relief that part of the pitch was obscured from a section of the press box. When I was at *The Telegraph* newspaper, our seat was down the front of the press box, allowing a clearer glimpse of Duncan Ferguson, Daniel Amokachi, Tim Cahill or James Beattie attacking opposing defences in front of the beseeching Gwladys Street End.

When I moved to *The Times*, we were on the back row and a large column got in the way. I could hardly complain. It was holding up the roof. Depending on closeness to deadline there would be whispers or shouts as to what had happened in the distant goalmouth. It was even worse for the radio commentators, who would lament the limitations of their vantage point.

Pure Everton. Covering a game at Goodison was a great experience because we felt embedded in the heart of the club. We were surrounded by fans so could quickly sense the mood – angry, often despairing, occasionally full of hope. Professional detachment was sometimes difficult to cling to amidst the frothing waves of Goodison emotion.

I remember covering one game in September 2010 when Everton trailed 3-1 to Manchester United in stoppage time. Cahill and Mikel Arteta then scored to take a point. Everton fans around the press box hammered against the side, almost shaking and deafening us. It was similar in May 2023 when Abdoulaye Doucoure scored against Bournemouth to keep Everton in the Premier League. Supporters invaded the pitch at the final whistle while flares and songs filled the air. As match reporters, such scenes made great copy.

Also useful were the fonts of Everton info around the press box. Former players, or those recovering from injury, along with scouts would sit in the row in front of the press box. They were always useful for some pre-match or half-time insight.

The old press entrance to Goodison Park came through reception so I felt even more in tune with the matchday rhythms of Everton Football Club. It was at Goodison that I learned the trick of walking up the stairs, gently encouraged on my way to the press box by stewards, but dawdling in front of the team pictures from down the generations. I was interested but it permitted me a few seconds on a landing in case a board member went past and I could grab a word or two. Stewards are hardly going to hurry you along if you're gazing admiringly at sepia prints of Everton heroes of yesteryear. The people's club are a very friendly club.

Goodison remains part of the Everton story as home to the club's WSL side, while the Toffees' new stadium is undeniably an upgrade. Still, a Premier League without the Grand Old Lady as part of it has a little less soul, a little less heritage, and a little less heart – but much better views.

Henry Winter

Covering a game at Goodison was a great experience because we felt embedded in the heart of the club

KYLIAN MBAPPE

"I want to win everything"

After the France captain was presented with the 2024-25 ESM European Golden Shoe, he reflected on his debut season at Real Madrid

Did you dream of winning this Golden Boot since you were a child? Do you see it as the first of many?
Of course. Since you're a child, you always dream of scoring goals. I think every kid who starts playing football dreams of scoring – and doing it often. In the end, it's a very important award and it makes me very happy, but everyone knows that team achievements are the most important. I hope to win another Golden Boot in the future but, above all, I hope we win the league. Since I won the Golden Boot thanks to my goals in La Liga, my goal this year is to keep going in the same way with the team. If we win the league and I win another Golden Boot, I'll be even happier than I am now.

You've scored a lot of goals – which one would you keep on your phone?
I usually say the last one but this time I'd choose the first, because it was my first goal at the Bernabeu. It was a special feeling against Betis, the first of many I hope to score in that stadium. It was a moment that marked the beginning of my story at the Bernabeu and left me with a beautiful memory.

Do you see yourself more as a number ten or a number nine?
I remember that on the day of my presentation, when I was asked, I said that the exact position doesn't matter to me. I'm a forward who can play in various positions and score from anywhere. In the end, I only look towards the goal. I prefer to let others describe what I am. My goal is to do my job and do it well, no matter where the coach puts me.

Have you changed at all since winning the World Cup in 2018?
I hope I have changed because that's the normal evolution of a footballer. You always have to improve. It would be a problem if I were the same as seven years ago. I think with everything I've achieved and the mistakes I've made, I've learned and become the player and person I am today. Change is positive, as long as it's for the better – and I'm not the same as before.

What's the biggest difference between Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid?
They're very different clubs, with different histories. Paris is a much younger club, while Real Madrid has many more years and a deeper history. The culture is also different. Without a doubt, Real Madrid is the best club in the world but Paris is also among the best. They're two different ways of understanding football, and I'm proud to have been part of both.

Do you think about surpassing Cristiano Ronaldo?
I don't know how to answer that question. Everyone knows Cristiano is a reference point in Madrid, a number one. I've been here for a year and a half, and he was here for nine years. I can't compare myself to what he did; my path is different. Being mentioned alongside Cristiano is already an honour but I just focus on following my own path, helping the team, and winning every possible trophy.

Have you been surprised by Arda Guler and the connection you have with him?
No, I'm not surprised. He's a young player with a lot of talent, ready to help the team. He's started the season in an impressive way for his age. He has a magical touch that the Bernabeu fans love. I just hope he keeps it up, because he can be very important for us, and I enjoy playing alongside him.

La Liga, Champions League, World Cup, Ballon d'Or – what are your goals for this upcoming year?
As a competitor, I want to fight for everything. You don't have to pick just one goal. It'll be difficult, but I want to win everything and give my best in every competition.

How do you stay focused for 90 minutes and keep yourself at 100%?
We're never truly at 100%. There's always something that prevents you from giving absolutely everything, but that's not an excuse. My goal is always to give the best version of myself, to respect the club, the fans, and the team, and to prepare in the best possible way. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's not, but you have to give it your all.

How do you feel about your role under Xabi Alonso?
I've had many coaches, and I'm used to each one having their own philosophy and style. Xabi is different from Ancelotti – he has his own way of working and little by little we're understanding what he wants. You can see on the pitch that we've improved since the start of the season, even though there's still room to grow. We haven't won anything yet but we're on the right path and we hope to win all the possible titles.

Do you set yourself a goal target for the year?
No, I never set a number as a limit. My goal is to take every scoring opportunity and help the team. The more goals I score, the more titles we can win. My priority is always to contribute to the team – whether by scoring goals or doing whatever it takes to help us win.

Interview courtesy of European Sports Media

KYLIAN
MBAPPÉ
DE ORO 24-25
MARCA
ESM
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

Morocco's time?

The 2025 Africa Cup of Nations hosts are hot favourites to become champions of Africa. Can they live up to those lofty expectations?

It will not be the first time in recent editions that Morocco are hot favourites for success at the Africa Cup of Nations finals, but the continental championship is a tournament where the form book is often way off the mark.

Morocco's status as the team tipped to win is enhanced not only by the fact that they are the hosts of the 24-team extravaganza, but also because they are the top-ranked team on the continent,

Hosts with the most... Morocco's players at the last Africa Cup of Nations two years ago

MARK GLEESON

have gone through their last two qualifying campaigns unbeaten, and set a new world record for successive wins.

Their victory over Congo in October was their 16th in a row and broke Spain's record for successive wins by a national team – and they extended that to 18 with two more victories in November. Morocco have not lost since South Africa knocked them out of the last tournament in the Ivory Coast, where their favourites tag came on the back of them becoming the first African side to go all the way to the World Cup semi-finals.

But the reality of the Cup of Nations is that there is any number of legitimate challengers, and it will be the form over the month that counts, not previous results, quality of players in the squad, or coaching expertise.

Other North African sides will be hoping that the familiar conditions give them an advantage – Algeria and Egypt both have strong sides – while the usual

PREVIOUS WINNERS

Year	Winners *(hosts)*
1957	**Egypt** *(Sudan)*
1959	**Egypt** *(Egypt)*
1962	**Ethiopia** *(Ethiopia)*
1963	**Ghana** *(Ghana)*
1965	**Ghana** *(Tunisia)*
1968	**Congo-Kinshasa** *(Ethiopia)*
1970	**Sudan** *(Sudan)*
1972	**Congo** *(Cameroon)*
1974	**Zaire** *(Egypt)*
1976	**Morocco** *(Ethiopia)*
1978	**Ghana** *(Ghana)*
1980	**Nigeria** *(Nigeria)*
1982	**Ghana** *(Libya)*
1984	**Cameroon** *(Ivory Coast)*
1986	**Egypt** *(Egypt)*
1988	**Cameroon** *(Morocco)*
1990	**Algeria** *(Algeria)*
1992	**Ivory Coast** *(Senegal)*
1994	**Nigeria** *(Tunisia)*
1996	**South Africa** *(South Africa)*
1998	**Egypt** *(Burkina Faso)*
2000	**Cameroon** *(Ghana and Nigeria)*
2002	**Cameroon** *(Mali)*
2004	**Tunisia** *(Tunisia)*
2006	**Egypt** *(Egypt)*
2008	**Egypt** *(Ghana)*
2010	**Egypt** *(Angola)*
2012	**Zambia** *(Equatorial Guinea and Gabon)*
2013	**Nigeria** *(South Africa)*
2015	**Ivory Coast** *(Equatorial Guinea)*
2017	**Cameroon** *(Gabon)*
2019	**Algeria** *(Egypt)*
2021	**Senegal** *(Cameroon)*
2023	**Ivory Coast** *(Ivory Coast)*

Home advantage ...Morocco will be roared on by the local support

coterie of West African challengers like holders Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal are also in with a chance.

In contrast, there is huge pressure on Morocco and coach Walid Regragui to deliver the country's first trophy since 1976, which is their only success in the continent's top sporting event. That is an extraordinary statistic for a country of Morocco's footballing profile.

It is also a logical expectation for a team ranked 11th in the FIFA rankings. But in recent months, some local critics have questioned Regragui's playing style, deeming it too defensive to be able to compete for victory at the Cup of Nations. It is an accusation the coach rejects: "Our offensive statistics speak for themselves. It's a shame we're stuck with a World Cup label when there's clearly a before and after in our game. We're an attacking, proactive team with possession."

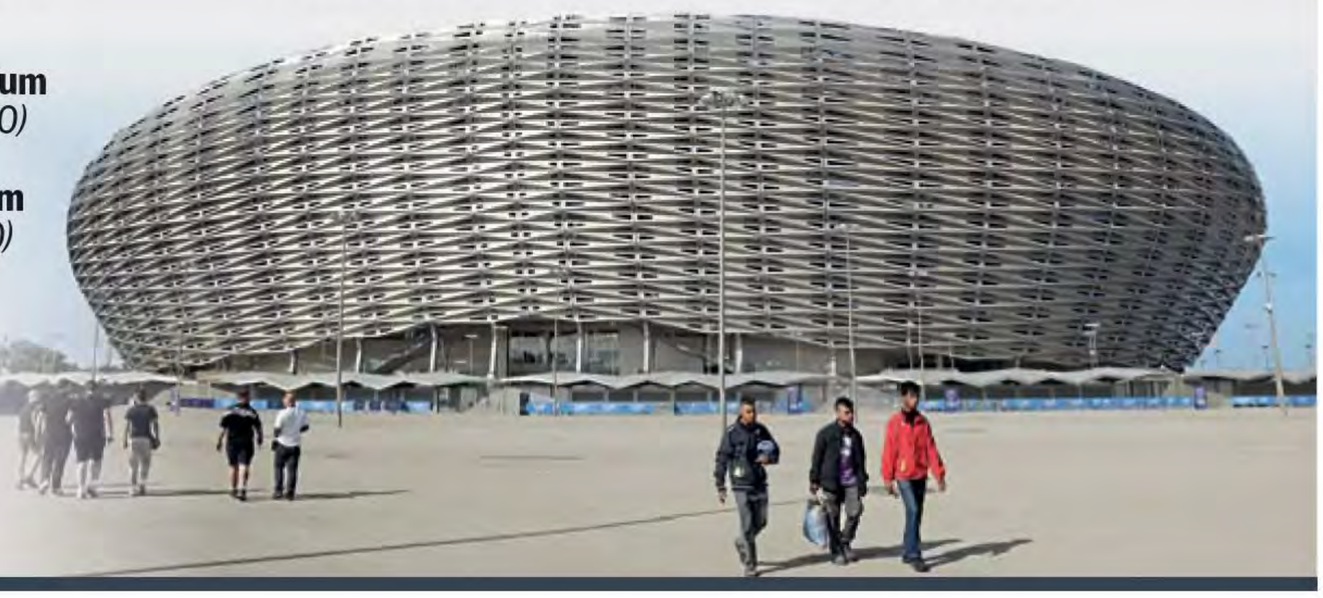
There is huge pressure on Morocco and coach Walid Regragui to deliver the country's first trophy since 1976

Morocco will open the tournament against the Comoros on December 21 in the brand-new Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat, which has been built for this tournament as well as the 2030 World Cup. Putting on a good show is a top priority for them, and there will be a record nine different venues for the tournament – four alone in Rabat, with matches also in Casablanca, Fez, Agadir, Marrakesh and Tangier.

Of their major rivals, Algeria will be desperate to make a mark, especially in their neighbour's backyard amid the tense relationship that exists between the North African countries, continually sniping at each other in the sporting

STADIUMS

Adrar Stadium
Agadir (45,000)
Stade Mohammed V
Casablanca (45,000)
Fez Stadium
Fez (45,000)
Marrakesh Stadium
Marrakesh (45,000)
Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium
Rabat (1) (68,700)
Moulay Hassan Stadium
Rabat (2) (22,000)
Al Barid Stadium
Rabat (3) (18,000)
Rabat Olympic Stadium
Rabat (4) (21,000)
Ibn Batouta Stadium
Tangier (75,000)



Final host... the rebuilt Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat

arena to score diplomatic points.

It is also arguably a last chance for Mo Salah, one of the continent's top footballing exports, but who has had no success with the national team in contrast to his trophy-laden club career. Twice Salah has finished runner-up as Egypt lost to Cameroon in 2017 and again in the 2021 final on penalties to Senegal.

But this perhaps will be third time lucky, especially if both he and Omar Marmoush are in top form.

There are no newcomers for these finals, and the likes of Comoros, along with Equatorial Guinea, might be the smallest countries at the tournament but they have every chance of causing upsets. The latter produced sensational results at the last finals – including a 4-0 thrashing of hosts Ivory Coast – and the 24-team format has actually allowed for more exciting uncertainty when many predicted it would make the early rounds of the tournament too predictable and pedestrian.

The finals should have been played mid-year, but the Club World Cup got preference in the FIFA calendar, with surprisingly no objection from the African leadership.

It means again the tug of loyalties that players are forced into as clubs in Europe bemoan their absence in mid-season. This was supposed to have been eradicated from the 2019 edition onwards when the tournament's schedule was moved from the start of the year to the middle. But the last two Cup of Nations, in Cameroon and the Ivory Coast, were both played in January.

The opening ten days of the AFCON are traditionally frenetic, with a non-stop schedule until the conclusion of the group stage – and expect the same again this time around with the latest edition cramming in all the first round action between December 21 and the end of the year. Upsets will likely once again be a distinct possibility.

Up for grabs...the AFCON trophy

SCHEDULE

GROUP A

Dec 21	**Morocco v Comoros**	*Rabat (1), 7pm*
Dec 22	**Mali v Zambia**	*Casablanca, 2pm*
Dec 26	**Zambia v Comoros**	*Casablanca, 5.30pm*
Dec 26	**Morocco v Mali**	*Rabat (1), 8pm*
Dec 29	**Zambia v Morocco**	*Rabat (1), 7pm*
Dec 29	**Comoros v Mali**	*Casablanca, 7pm*

GROUP B

Dec 22	**South Africa v Angola**	*Marrakech, 5pm*
Dec 22	**Egypt v Zimbabwe**	*Agadir, 8pm*
Dec 26	**Angola v Zimbabwe**	*Marrakech, 12.30pm*
Dec 26	**Egypt v South Africa**	*Agadir, 3pm*
Dec 29	**Angola v Egypt**	*Agadir, 4pm*
Dec 29	**Zimbabwe v South Africa**	*Marrakech, 4pm*

GROUP C

Dec 23	**Nigeria v Tanzania**	*Fez, 5.30pm*
Dec 23	**Tunisia v Uganda**	*Rabat (4), 8pm*
Dec 27	**Uganda v Tanzania**	*Rabat (3), 5.30pm*
Dec 27	**Nigeria v Tunisia**	*Fez, 8pm*
Dec 30	**Uganda v Nigeria**	*Fez, 4pm*
Dec 30	**Tanzania v Tunisia**	*Rabat (4), 4pm*

GROUP D

Dec 23	**DR Congo v Benin**	*Rabat (3), 12.30pm*
Dec 23	**Senegal v Botswana**	*Tangier, 3pm*
Dec 27	**Benin v Botswana**	*Rabat (4), 12.30pm*
Dec 27	**Senegal v DR Congo**	*Tangier, 3pm*
Dec 30	**Benin v Senegal**	*Tangier, 7pm*
Dec 30	**Botswana v DR Congo**	*Rabat (3), 7pm*

GROUP E

Dec 24	**Burkina Faso v Equatorial Guinea**	*Casablanca, 12.30pm*
Dec 24	**Algeria v Sudan**	*Rabat (2), 3pm*
Dec 28	**Equatorial Guinea v Sudan**	*Casablanca, 3pm*
Dec 28	**Algeria v Burkina Faso**	*Rabat (2), 5.30pm*
Dec 31	**Equatorial Guinea v Algeria**	*Rabat (2), 4pm*
Dec 31	**Sudan v Burkina Faso**	*Casablanca, 4pm*

GROUP F

Dec 24	**Ivory Coast v Mozambique**	*Marrakech, 5.30pm*
Dec 24	**Cameroon v Gabon**	*Agadir, 8pm*
Dec 28	**Gabon v Mozambique**	*Agadir, 12.30pm*
Dec 28	**Ivory Coast v Cameroon**	*Marrakech, 8pm*
Dec 31	**Gabon v Ivory Coast**	*Marrakech, 7pm*
Dec 31	**Mozambique v Cameroon**	*Agadir, 7pm*

ROUND OF 16

(1)	Jan 3	**1st Group D v 3rd Group B/E/F**	*Tangier, 4pm*
(2)	Jan 3	**2nd Group A v 2nd Group C**	*Casablanca, 7pm*
(3)	Jan 4	**1st Group A v 3rd Group C/D/E**	*Rabat (1), 4pm*
(4)	Jan 4	**2nd Group B v 2nd Group F**	*Rabat (3), 7pm*
(5)	Jan 5	**1st Group B v 3rd Group A/C/D**	*Agadir, 4pm*
(6)	Jan 5	**1st Group C v 3rd Group A/B/F**	*Fez, 7pm*
(7)	Jan 6	**1st Group E v 2nd Group D**	*Rabat (2), 4pm*
(8)	Jan 6	**1st Group F v 2nd Group E**	*Marrakech, 7pm*

QUARTER-FINALS

(9)	Jan 9	**Winner Match 2 v Winner Match 1**	*Tangier, 4pm*
(10)	Jan 9	**Winner Match 4 v Winner Match 3**	*Rabat (1), 7pm*
(11)	Jan 10	**Winner Match 7 v Winner Match 6**	*Marrakech, 4pm*
(12)	Jan 10	**Winner Match 5 v Winner Match 8**	*Agadir, 7pm*

SEMI-FINALS

(13)	Jan 14	**Winner QF1 (9) v Winner QF4 (12)**	*Tangier, 5pm*
(14)	Jan 14	**Winner QF3 (11) v Winner QF2 (10)**	*Rabat (1), 8pm*

THIRD PLACE PLAY-OFF

(15)	Jan 17	*Casablanca, 4pm*

FINAL

(16)	Jan 18	*Rabat (1), 7pm*

Facetoface

JAMES KWESI APPIAH

"We might cause a surprise"

The former Ghana international has taken war-torn Sudan to the Cup of Nations finals despite no league in the country and the players all in exile

Just how hard has it been to qualify a team whose country is locked in such a brutal war?
It has been a really difficult situation because of the war, but the real problem has been trying to keep the players motivated when they have not been paid their allowances and bonuses and those kinds of things. If players don't get that, [they] have no motivation to play. And in the national team, that has been one of the major obstacles. But I've tried to change their mentality, not to think about money now, but to look at the way forward, what they can also get from qualifying for the Cup of Nations. That is something that I've put in their heads, so their focus was not on the disadvantages of what is going on in their country but to focus on what can happen to their lives. That has been the issue that we've been trying to tackle over a long time.

What are the practicalities of your job? With no league in Sudan, how do you pick a team and when can you work with them?
It has always been in Sudan that Al Hilal and Al Merrikh are the two clubs from which most of the players are picked, and I do too. Unfortunately, Merrikh last season went out early in the Champions League, and this season have now also missed out on the group phase. Hilal are the only club left in African club competition, so I monitor all of their games. But they also have a lot of professional players who are not Sudanese. It is not easy keeping an eye on all the potential players.

Given the situation in Sudan and the players' concerns, how much of your job is mental versus actual coaching?
I personally believe that you need plenty of personal interaction with your players. That's where you get to know their problems, whether they understand the playing philosophy, the roles that you're giving them. So, I tend to rely a lot on one-on-one interactions to make sure that my players understand me and what I want from them. When I was coach of Ghana, most of the players were top professionals from clubs in Europe, so their level of understanding was much better. But with the Sudan players, we need to talk a lot because of all that has happened to them and their country.

What are the expectations for the tournament in Morocco?
First, it will be my job to ensure the players play to the level of what is needed out of them because once you're in the tournament, that's where you feel the heat. I've stressed that the tournament is a big opportunity for them, with all the agents from European clubs coming around to look out for good players. One good thing about the Sudanese is that they tend to listen, and they do try to do the best that they can, given the circumstances that we are in. I believe practically, if we get things right, we might cause a surprise.

Top seeds Algeria will be a tough start, but Equatorial Guinea and Burkina Faso are the other teams in your group...
One thing I keep telling the players is: "Look, you can't tell me you want to go to the World Cup if you are in a group with Senegal, DR Congo, Togo and Mauritania, and you cannot beat them. So, if you want to win the AFCON then make up your mind that whoever is in your group, you can rise to their level and beat them." This is one of the things I've tried to put into their minds that whoever you face, don't look down on yourself. Think that you can also play at the level that they play. If you think that you don't deserve to win the AFCON, then why participate in the first place?

You were looking very good at one stage of the World Cup qualifiers, but then the positive results didn't come. Why?
Yes, we started very well [Sudan won ten points from the first four Group B fixtures] because we were able to camp in Saudi Arabia, and I had six to seven weeks to train with the boys before we played the games. The key game against Senegal [in September] came straight after the CHAN tournament, and all the players were totally tired. The additional players we called up from overseas clubs to join unfortunately only arrived two days before, so it was hard to get the best out of the guys.

As a Ghanaian, does it feel strange to not have the Black Stars playing at this Cup of Nations finals?
Yeah, it's really, really unfortunate. But I think it was something also good because after Ghana failed to qualify [in November 2024], they sat down and decided, look, no matter what, we have to go to the World Cup. And I think now they've set things right and put some things together to make sure they performed at the right time.

You were a player at the 1982 AFCON finals in Libya. How much has the Cup of Nations changed since then?
Oh, I think it's a whole lot better because if you look at the time in Libya up to now, there's massive improvement. It's so much better organised and the level of performance of the players has also improved considerably. In 1982, there were maybe only one or two professionals. But now we are dealing with almost all the countries having top-class professionals, which has improved our game in Africa. And I personally believe going forward there'll be a whole lot more improvements, making sure we are at the level where when we go to the World Cup, we go there with the aim of winning the competition, not just to participate.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Facetoface

STEFANO CUSIN

"It will be the AFCON of surprises"

The Comoros head coach on why his team can upset the odds in Morocco

What are your impressions of the group you've been drawn into with Morocco, Zambia and Mali?
It's definitely a tough group because all the teams, including us, finished top of their qualifying group. That said, if we're at the Africa Cup of Nations, we're not there by chance. We'll fight to the end.

Which opponent do you fear the most?
They're all strong, each for different reasons. Morocco is one of the best teams in the world, not just in Africa. We've faced Mali twice and lost both times quite clearly. Zambia, by tradition, is always a strong side. There isn't one opponent I fear more than the others, but I have full confidence in my players. In big matches they always rise to the occasion, so I'm expecting surprises at this AFCON.

Your qualifying campaign was quite surprising as you finished first in your group. Did you expect that?
No one could have expected that. We were really unlucky in the draw, picking the toughest opponent in each pot: Gambia, with several players who've played in Serie A and two straight AFCON appearances; Madagascar, against whom we'd never won; and Tunisia, who had just beaten France at the World Cup in Qatar. On paper, we looked doomed. We started with two draws, against Gambia and Madagascar. The turning point came in the double fixture with Tunisia. We were excellent, especially in the first match in Rades, because Tunisia hadn't lost at home in 14 years. They're strong, structured, experienced. After our 1-1 draw with Gambia, I'd shown my players the video of Tunisia's last-minute 1-0 win over Madagascar, saying: "This is what a winning team looks like. They may let you play, but in the end they win because they believe, because they attack the box with five men." In Tunisia, we played a perfect game in terms of intensity, scored at the right moment, and won on merit, not by luck but as a team. Drawing again in the return leg gave us an edge over the others, who had both lost to Tunisia. Then we faced Gambia, who had to win. A draw was enough for us, and we won. After that, we beat Madagascar too. Finishing top was incredible.

What are your expectations for AFCON?
This will be the AFCON of surprises. I've attended the last four or five editions as a spectator, and I've always seen predictions collapse as early as the group stage. Our objective is to get out of the group. That's our focus, without setting any unrealistic targets. Just qualifying is already half a victory, given where we've come from and what happened before my arrival. We'll go there to enjoy every moment.

What's the current state of football in the Comoros?
The national team and the domestic leagues are two very different things. There are three islands, each with its own league, and the level is quite low. It's difficult for a local player to break into the senior national team. We're trying to involve them more: we've set up coaching and fitness programmes and player selections, and for the Arab Cup in Qatar in November, most of the squad were home-based players to give them visibility. The national team, meanwhile, has grown enormously. In two years we've climbed 30 places in the FIFA rankings, qualified for the AFCON as group winners, and came within two matches of reaching the World Cup, which would have been a miracle given that for two years we've played all our games away from home because we don't have a stadium. This growth comes from several factors, but above all from our scouting work with dual-nationals. The coach matters, of course, but players win matches. Without players, it's very hard to win, as I saw in South Sudan. Our scouting never stops. We have a database of around 60 players, from France's fifth division up to Ligue 2. We monitor them all, especially the young ones. When we think a player is ready, we call two or three into camp; if they impress, they stay. It's continuous work, and I believe we're one of the African national teams that has grown the most in the past two years.

As head coach, who do you see as your key players at the tournament?
Rafiki Said, forward for Standard Liege, was once followed by Fiorentina and Verona. He's unpredictable, scores spectacular goals and, if he finds consistency, he can become a top player. Then there's Zaydou [Youssouf], who plays for Al Fateh in Saudi Arabia, previously at Saint-Etienne and in Portugal, a quality player. Warmed Omari from Hamburg is currently injured but expected back for the AFCON. And Kenan Toibibou, a young centre-back playing in Slovenia for Bravo FK. I brought him in in September to test him, liked what I saw, and started him in our last two matches. I'm convinced he'll soon be playing in Ligue 1 or elsewhere in Europe. Overall, though, we don't win games through individuals – it's all about the team.

Who are your favourites to win this AFCON?
Predictions are made to be broken, there's always the unpredictable. It will be the AFCON of surprises. Honestly, I don't see how Morocco, who have by far the best squad, playing at home with their crowd and a good coach, can fail to win it. Then you have outsiders like Senegal and Egypt; the North African sides are all strong, including Algeria. The DR Congo are also very competitive. In a knockout game anything can happen, one red card can change everything. But for me the clear favourite is Morocco, followed by the rest: Ivory Coast, DR Congo, Senegal. I have the feeling this will be a tournament of surprises, with several big teams possibly failing to make it out of the group stage. There's great balance this time.

Interview by Emanuele Giulianelli

LUB

Compiled by Mark Gleeson

GROUP A

Second AFCON appearance ...Comoros

Hosts and favourites ...Morocco

COMOROS
(0 AFCON wins)

The Indian Ocean island nation return for only their second finals appearance after a shock win over Ghana in Cameroon 2021 and an unexpected place in the round of 16 at the first time of asking. They qualified unbeaten at the top of their group, beating Tunisia into second place with a surprise 1-0 away triumph and overcoming the disadvantage of not being able to play at home because their stadium was in need of renovating. Their home games were hosted in Ivory Coast and Morocco, but this proved no hindrance. It did not go as smoothly in the subsequent World Cup qualifiers, although there they also made a nuisance of themselves and were in contention for a while in a group containing Ghana, Mali and Madagascar.

KEY PLAYER

Youssouf M'Changama

The captain made his pro debut with Oldham, but has spent most of his career in Ligue 1 and Ligue 2. He is Comoros' most capped footballer.

THE COACH

Stefano Cusin

The 57-year-old Italian was previously coach of South Sudan, and was one of Walter Zenga's assistants during a brief sojourn at Wolverhampton Wanderers in 2016.

MALI
(0 AFCON wins)

The West African nation has been wracked by civil unrest for years and, consequently, has a barely functioning football federation. Resources are scarce, and it is therefore a hard slog to keep the side going, even if it is packed with massive potential. Mali have the ability to go all the way in what will be their tenth successive tournament appearance. In that spell, they have twice got to the semi-finals and last time out were quarter-finalists in the Ivory Coast. Influential captain Hamari Traore returned in November after a year away from the side for criticising the country's football administration, but Yves Bissouma could miss out after surgery in October for an ankle injury picked up during a World Cup qualifier.

KEY PLAYER

Dorgeles Nene

Exciting 23-year-old winger who signed a five-year deal with Turkish giants Fenerbahce at the start of the season and netted three goals in the AFCON qualifiers.

THE COACH

Tom Saintfiet

The 52-year-old Belgian has coached 12 different national teams, but Mali is the one with the most promise. He took Gambia to a shock quarter-final place at the 2021 Cup of Nations in Cameroon.

MOROCCO
(1 AFCON win, 1976)

It is now almost a half-century since Morocco's only AFCON triumph, with successive generations threatening success but wilting in the pressured tournament environment. Since becoming the first African side to reach the World Cup semi-finals, there is even more expectation on the team who go into their own tournament on the back of a world-record run of 18 successive wins. All but one, however, was against African opposition, with the exception being Bahrain, whom Morocco beat 1-0 in a friendly in October. The squad of players to pick from has grown impressively; more and more players from the large diaspora have committed to play for the team, and therefore selection of the final squad is not going to be an easy task.

KEY PLAYER

Achraf Hakimi

Latest to be crowned African Footballer of the Year, but is battling to be fit in time after suffering an ankle injury playing for PSG against Bayern Munich.

THE COACH

Walid Regragui

As a player, he was on the losing side in 2004 when Morocco last reached the final, losing to hosts Tunisia. He won the CAF Champions League with Wydad Casablanca.

ZAMBIA
(1 AFCON win, 2012)

A severely disappointing 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign – finishing way off the pace behind Morocco and Niger – culminated in the sacking of former Ghana, Chelsea and West Ham United manager Avram Grant just seven weeks from the tournament kick-off, leaving his untested assistant Moses Sichone in charge. The country was a perennial force at the Cup of Nations for decades, culminating in success in 2012, but missed three of the last four tournaments and in Ivory Coast two years ago did not win a single game. A strong Zambian league was previously always the backbone of their national team success, but these days they have a growing number of players at overseas clubs and far less reliance on locally-based players.

KEY PLAYER

Patson Daka

The striker was only 17 when he made his national team debut, and he has since evolved into the team's talisman.

THE COACH

Moses Sichone

The former Cologne centre-back should have taken charge of his first games in friendlies against South Africa and Angola in November, but was hospitalised by food poisoning.

GROUP B

On the up... South Africa

Record AFCON winners...Egypt

ANGOLA
(0 AFCON wins)

Reaching the quarter-final stage at the last Cup of Nations matched Angola's best previous performance and was widely celebrated as a potential new dawn. The qualifiers for this tournament went even better with an away win over Ghana and an unbeaten run to finish top of the group. It enflamed hopes of a World Cup place, but those qualifiers quickly went pear-shaped with a home defeat to Cape Verde in March. When they lost 1-0 to Libya in Luanda in September, Portuguese head coach Pedro Goncalves was shown the door after six years in the job. He had been particularly proud of his longevity in the role – a rare occurrence in the African game – and was replaced by 47-year-old Frenchman Patrice Beaumelle.

KEY PLAYER

Gelson Dala

The forward failed to make the grade at Sporting and now plays in Qatar, but his goal tally for Angola – nearly one every two games – is extremely impressive.

THE COACH

Patrice Beaumelle

Was assistant to Herve Renard when he won the Cup of Nations in 2012 (with Zambia) and 2015 (with Ivory Coast), but led the Ivorians to the last 16 by himself in 2021.

EGYPT
(7 AFCON wins, last in 2010)

Seven titles is a record for the Cup of Nations, but the last of those successes was now almost 16 years ago, and there has been an air of desperation around Egypt's recent bids for success. They were runners-up in 2017 and 2021, but at the last edition in the Ivory Coast they failed to win any of their four games, bumbling their way through the first round with three successive draws and then losing to DR Congo in the round of 16 on penalties. A much vaunted attack with Mostafa Mohamed, Omar Marmoush and Mohamed Salah should induce fear in opposition back-lines, but the lack of a midfield playmaker to get the ball to them has been all too obvious of late.

KEY PLAYER

Omar Marmoush

A knee injury suffered against Burkina Faso in October means he is battling to catch up on his match readiness in time for the tournament kick-off.

THE COACH

Hossam Hassan

A fearsome forward in his day, he was joint-top scorer at the 1998 Cup of Nations and is the Pharaohs' record scorer with 69 goals – just six ahead of Mohamed Salah. The 59-year-old previously managed Jordan between 2013 and 2014.

SOUTH AFRICA
(1 AFCON win, 1996)

Third place at the last finals was a massive fillip for South Africa, who had been floundering in the previous decade. It was the country's first footballing high point since the hosting of the 2010 World Cup, which had failed to boost the domestic game as much as had been hoped for. There was some good fortune for *Bafana Bafana* on their way to the semi-finals in the Ivory Coast and more luck as they edged Nigeria and Benin to qualify for the World Cup. They did so largely with home-based players and will be one of the only teams in Morocco with a squad dominated by players from local clubs. Leading side Mamelodi Sundowns, who were African Champions League runners-up last season, provide the backbone of the team and make the coach's job a lot easier.

KEY PLAYER

Lyle Foster

The only South African in the Premier League plays at Burnley and has overcome mental health issues to become one of the team's leading lights.

THE COACH

Hugo Broos

The 73-year-old Belgian won the Cup of Nations title with Cameroon back in 2017 and will retire after next year's World Cup in North America.

ZIMBABWE
(0 AFCON wins)

Failure to win a single game in their drab 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign saw German coach Michael Nees fired in October and replaced a few weeks later by Mario Marinica from Romania, who has had something of a journeyman career. Zimbabwe qualified for the Cup of Nations despite winning only two games in their group and finishing a distant second to Cameroon, but it must be seen as an achievement after they had spent almost two years sidelined by a FIFA ban for government interference in the running of the football association. The players made up for lost time to qualify for what will be a sixth finals appearance, and they will now be bidding to get past the group stage for the first time.

KEY PLAYER

Marshall Munetsi

The hard-working utility player, signed by Wolves last winter, can do a job for his country in many departments across the field.

THE COACH

Mario Marinica

At the 2021 AFCON finals, Marinica had even less time to prepare when Malawi appointed him coach only weeks before the tournament kicked off in Cameroon.

Compiled by Mark Gleeson

GROUP C

Point to prove... Nigeria

Eyes on the prize...Tunisia

NIGERIA
(3 AFCON wins, last in 2013)

Nigeria are targeting AFCON glory to make up for the disappointment of elimination from 2026 World Cup qualification in November's African play-offs. A boycott over outstanding payments was swiftly resolved before the 4-1 extra-time victory over Gabon, however the Super Eagles lost the decisive tie against DR Congo. There is also the heartbreak of losing the last Cup of Nations final, where they took the lead against hosts Ivory Coast but ended up going down 2-1. Africa's most populous nation have been African champions three times, spread out over various generations in 1980 (when they hosted), 1994 and 2013. This is possibly the last chance of silverware for established players like Alex Iwobi and Wilfred Ndidi, now in their late 20s, of whom much was expected.

KEY PLAYER

Victor Osimhen

The 26-year-old striker has been in blistering form for Galatasaray, the sort of form that could carry Nigeria to the title.

THE COACH

Eric Chelle

The Ivory Coast-born 48-year-old was Mali coach when they reached the AFCON quarter-finals in 2023 and a surprise appointment by the Super Eagles last January.

TANZANIA
(0 AFCON wins)

The East Africans were another of the countries to panic after a poor World Cup qualifying campaign and fired coach Hemed Suleiman with less than two months before the tournament kick-off. He is replaced by Argentine Miguel Gamondi who is coaching at Singida Black Stars in the Tanzanian top flight. This is the third time in the last four editions that the Taifa Stars have qualified but they are yet to win a game. Their nine previous matches at the finals in 1980, 2019 and 2023 have delivered three draws and six defeats. A first win, and potential progress to the last 16, will be the priority for a country whose top two teams, Simba and Young Africans, are increasingly competitive in continental competition.

KEY PLAYER

Charles M'Mombwa

Born in DR Congo and brought up in a refugee camp in Tanzania before growing up in Australia, the 27-year-old has been a revelation since his debut two years ago.

THE COACH

Miguel Gamondi

The Argentine is an old hand on the African coaching circuit, having won the South African league at Mamelodi Sundowns and worked at clubs in Algeria and Morocco.

TUNISIA
(1 AFCON win, 2004)

The Tunisians extend their record for most successive Cup of Nations finals appearances to 17, but will be hoping for a vast improvement on their last outing in the Ivory Coast where they failed to win a game and went home early after finishing rock-bottom of a group containing Mali, South Africa and Namibia. Qualification this time around was not all that impressive either as they lost at home to Comoros, which was a first home defeat in a qualifier in over a decade. But in the more recent World Cup qualifiers, they finished the campaign without conceding a goal in an African first. This reflects the mercurial nature of the side: always formidable and never to be to underestimated but can easily implode.

KEY PLAYER

Ellyes Skhiri

The 30-year-old Eintracht Frankfurt midfielder has been a consistent presence in the team, playing every one of the 21 games at the last two World Cups and the last three AFCONs.

THE COACH

Sami Trabelsi

The former national team full-back of 81 caps is in his second spell as coach, having quit after Tunisia failed to get past the first round at the 2013 finals in South Africa.

UGANDA
(0 AFCON wins)

The Cranes are one of the early competitors in the Cup of Nations finals as one of four teams at the 1962 tournament, but this is only the third time they've reached the finals since 1978 when they finished runners-up. Their last appearance was at the 2019 edition in Egypt where they got through the group phase and reached the last 16. As co-hosts of the next finals in 2027, qualification for Morocco is a major boost. They have persuaded the 40-year-old goalkeeper Denis Onyango, a former winner of the CAF award for the best African-based player for his exploits with Mamelodi Sundowns, to come out of international retirement and will see the East African derby against Tanzania as a must-win match.

KEY PLAYER

Uche Mubiru Ikpeazu

Uses his mother's maiden name, Mubiru, rather than his Nigerian father's name when on national team duty, but either way the 30-year-old English-born striker gives their attack a real boost.

THE COACH

Paul Put

The 69-year-old Belgian has worked in Africa since 2008 with stints as national team boss of Burkina Faso, Gambia, Kenya, Guinea and Congo.

GROUP D

Confidence rising...Benin

African force... Senegal

BENIN
(0 AFCON wins)

The confidence in the ranks of the team from the small West African country will be buoyed by the fact that they were in World Cup qualification contention right down to their last fixture in October, before neighbours Nigeria blew them away and allowed South Africa to qualify from their group instead. Their Cup of Nations qualifying campaign was also impressive by past standards and this will be their fifth appearance at the finals. They reached the quarter-finals in 2019 without winning a game, drawing their three group matches and then edging Morocco on penalties in the last 16 before losing to Senegal. Once nicknamed the Squirrels, Benin's side are now known as *Le Guepards* (the Leopards).

KEY PLAYER

Steve Mounie

The Montpellier graduate had a two-season spell in the Premier League with Huddersfield from 2017 to 2019. He's got 22 goals in 66 games for Benin.

THE COACH

Gernot Rohr

The 72-year-old former Bayern Munich and Bordeaux full-back will be coaching at a fourth Cup of Nations finals after taking charge of Gabon (2012), Niger (2013) and Nigeria (2019).

BOTSWANA
(0 AFCON wins)

The lowest ranked nation (138th) of all the 24 finalists will be making only their second finals appearance after their debut in 2012 when they lost all three matches. The Zebras qualified despite boss Didier Gomes Da Rosa quitting midway through the campaign for a post in Libya. Morena Ramoreboli stepped in as caretaker to see them to the finals and then was given the position full-time in early 2025. Botswana have only a handful of foreign-based players but a lively league. In the 2021-22 season, Jwaneng Galaxy, then led by Ramoreboli, become the country's first-ever side to qualify for the group phase of the African Champions League.

KEY PLAYER

Tumisang Orebonye

The 29-year-old striker has played club football in Morocco for AS FAR and current club Wydad, plus across the border with USM Alger, with whom he won the 2023 African Confederation Cup.

THE COACH

Morena Ramoreboli

Made his name when he coached a third-tier amateur club to victory in the South African FA Cup first round against giants Orlando Pirates, before moving to club football in Botswana.

DR CONGO
(2 AFCON wins, last in 1974)

Victory in November's World Cup play-offs for the four best group runners-up after the completion of the African qualifiers has left *La Celeste* one game away from a berth at the finals in North America. The boost of eliminating both Cameroon and Nigeria will stand them in good stead for these finals. Confidence has been building since the last edition in the Ivory Coast, where they finished fourth, and they must be considered genuine contenders for the title this time around even if not among the obvious favourites. The country was known as Congo-Kinshasa when they won the Cup of Nations first in 1968 and then Zaire for their second and last triumph in 1974. They are long overdue a third continental title.

KEY PLAYER

Aaron Wan-Bissaka

It took a while for the Croydon-born former England U21 right-back to commit to play for the DRC, but he has proven an important addition since debuting in September.

THE COACH

Sebastien Desabre

The 49-year-old Frenchman first started coaching in Africa in 2010 and was at the 2019 Cup of Nations finals with Uganda, who made it past the opening round.

SENEGAL
(1 AFCON win, 2021)

A proper force in the African game, champions in 2021 and a strong bet for success in Morocco this time. There is an increasing pool of players at clubs in Europe that gives them plenty of options and the depth needed for tournament success. They were unbeaten in their Cup of Nations qualifying campaign, which was played between September and November 2024, and then did not lose a game again in securing World Cup qualification either. The only blot was the unceremonious dismissal of head coach Aliou Cisse after a decade in charge, including securing their first-ever African title. His surprise removal came midway through the Cup of Nations qualifying campaign.

KEY PLAYER

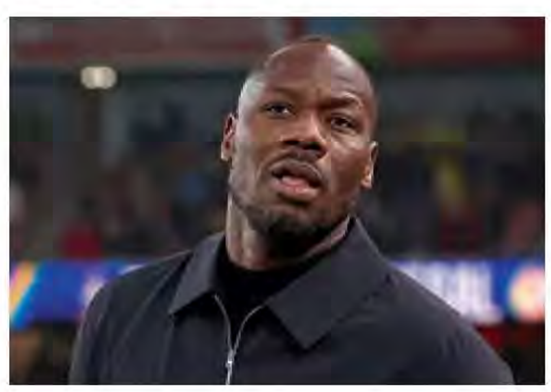
Ismaila Sarr

A consistent attacking factor for the side since his debut as a teenager. Now, at the age of 27, he is headed to his fifth successive Cup of Nations finals.

THE COACH

Pape Bouna Thiaw

The Lions of Teranga promoted up from within their coaching ranks when Aliou Cisse left, handing over to the former international forward who was in the squad that reached the final in 2002 in Mali.



Compiled by Mark Gleeson

GROUP E

Algeria skipper ...Riyad Mahrez

Surprise packages ...Equatorial Guinea

ALGERIA
(2 AFCON wins, last in 2019)

Algeria have a strong squad with plenty of motivation to win in their neighbours' backyard, given the incredible enmity between the two North African nations. The border between Algeria and Morocco is closed because of their differences over the disputed Western Sahara, and scoring petty political points over the long-standing conflict has spilled over into the football arena. On the pitch, the squad continues to be strengthened by French-born players throwing in their international future with Algeria, especially now that a World Cup trip is looming. The Algerians had a horror last two tournaments, going home early from both Cameroon and the Ivory Coast. As favourites and defending champions in 2021 they lost to Equatorial Guinea, before being dumped out by Mauritania last time out. They have a lot to make up for.

KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Amoura

Ten goals in as many games made the 25-year-old Wolfsburg striker the top scorer in Africa's recent WC qualifiers.

THE COACH

Vladimir Petkovic

The Bosnian-born coach took his adopted country, Switzerland, to the 2018 World Cup in Russia and two European Championships.

BURKINA FASO
(0 AFCON wins)

The 2013 runners-up have been a regular presence at the Cup of Nations finals, with this being their 13th appearance in the last 16 editions of the tournament. Second place in 2013 remains their best return, but they were also semi-finalists in the 2017 and 2021 finals, so will enjoy the respect of their opponents. Qualification for the tournament in Morocco came despite having to play all their home matches abroad, as the condition of the stadiums in which they hosted the 1998 finals had deteriorated to such an extent that they were disqualified from hosting any national team games. There are some key elements to the side, like defender Edmond Tapsoba and midfielder Blati Toure, and a very lively set of attackers.

KEY PLAYER

Dango Ouattara

A record £42.5m move to Brentford at the start of the season reflects the enormous potential that the 23-year-old forward from Ouagadougou has.

THE COACH

Brama Traore

Appointed in March 2024 after previously working with Burkina Faso's junior national teams, through which many of their current squad have come.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA
(0 AFCON wins)

In October, there was a rare revolt by players angered at poor logistics who refused to get on a plane and travel to Malawi for their penultimate World Cup qualifier. Although it had no effect on the outcome of the campaign, Equatorial Guinea ceded the points and were handed a hefty fine. The upshot was a temporary sacking of the head coach, later reinstated, and a clean-out of the squad, although many of those initially removed were brought back in for the November camp that the team held in Turkey. The side's lack of squad depth works to their benefit in that they have consistent selection and a team that knows each other very well, making them a dangerous proposition – as evidenced by their heroics at the last Cup of Nations finals when they topped a group featuring Nigeria and Ivory Coast.

KEY PLAYER

Iban Salvador

The forward is a real thorn for opposition defenders, and has plenty of experience with this being the 30-year-old's fourth tournament.

THE COACH

Juan Micha

This is a third tournament in a row that the 50-year-old manager has qualified the team for, and he has had more than 50 games in charge.

SUDAN
(1 AFCON win, 1970)

One of the three participants at the first-ever Cup of Nations tournament, which they hosted back in 1957, and a winner in 1970. But those glory days are long gone and this will be only their fourth trip to the finals in the last 25 editions, stretching back over four decades. To have reached the tournament in Morocco is an extraordinary feat given the destruction that their country has suffered over several years of bloody civil strife. Sudan's top two teams, Al Hilal and Al Merrikh, have enough resources to go into exile and keep playing, both in continental club competition and as guests in the Mauritania league last season and Rwanda now. The national team draws almost all the players from the two clubs, so has been able to overcome the enormous calamity the country has suffered.

KEY PLAYER

Mohamed Abdelrahman

The 32-year-old striker has been a prolific scorer for both Al Hilal and the national team and is one of the players remaining from Sudan's squad at the 2021 finals.

THE COACH

James Kwesi Appiah

A finalist with Ghana as a player at AFCON 1982 and a World Cup coach with his country in Brazil in 2014.

GROUP F

Last AFCON finals...Gabon's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

Title holders ...Ivory Coast

CAMEROON
(5 AFCON wins, last in 2017)

The Indomitable Lions will still be smarting after failing to qualify for the World Cup, but their elimination in November's play-offs at the hands of DR Congo came after some 18 months of conflict between then-coach Marc Brys and federation president Samuel Eto'o, who finally got rid of the Belgian just weeks before the tournament kicked off. The fractious atmosphere spilled over to on-pitch displays and left Cameroon with a record of just four wins from nine in the year. Their AFCON record is among the best, with five titles and 21 appearances, but a lot of roar has gone from the Lions. Injury to Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa is a major blow, while the omissions of goalkeeper Andre Onana and talismanic forward Vincent Aboubakar are big calls.

KEY PLAYER

Carlos Baleba

The 21-year-old has the potential to be a force for his country with his box-to-box style. His impact is already evident some 18 months after his debut.

THE COACH

David Pagou

The 56-year-old won the league with PWD Bamenda in 2020 and prides himself on his disciplined approach. His loyalty to Eto'o has seen him given temporary reins.

GABON
(0 AFCON wins)

This will be Gabon's ninth finals appearance since their debut in 1994, but they have never gone further than the last eight. This edition marks an international swansong for former African Footballer of the Year Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, who has been at the heart of all their hopes since the 2010 Cup of Nations finals when he first featured for the team that his father used to captain. Aubameyang will be competing at a sixth finals but, at age 36, this is almost certainly his last. It has mostly been a frustrating experience for him, given the way the quality of his team-mates varies in stark contrast to the talent that he often plays alongside at club level. Gabon were an agonising point short of 2026 World Cup qualification and then ran out of steam in the November play-offs.

KEY PLAYER

Denis Bouanga

A prolific scorer in MLS, where he has won the title with LAFC and where his form has flourished after falling to crack it in his native France.

THE COACH

Thierry Mouyouma

Played in defence for Gabon at the 2000 AFCON finals and now returns for his first tournament as coach.

IVORY COAST
(3 AFCON wins, last in 2023)

The defending champions had a rodeo-style ride to the last Cup of Nations title, almost eliminated after a group phase disaster, only to get a lucky break as one of the best third-place finishers and then slowly grow through the knockout stages after firing their head coach. Emerse Fae has stayed on as boss since the triumph and amassed a post-tournament record of 12 wins in 20 games with four draws and four defeats. He has also brought in a bevy of new players that will see the squad much changed from the one that proved victorious on home soil almost 24 months ago. The Ivorians are appearing at a 26th Cup of Nations tournament, which is one behind the record of Egypt.

KEY PLAYER

Franck Kessie

The midfielder and captain, formerly with Barcelona and Milan, now plays in Saudi Arabia for Al Ahli and could reach the 100-cap milestone at these Cup of Nations finals.

THE COACH

Emerse Fae

Took over from the experienced Frenchman Jean-Louis Gasset during the last finals, despite the fact he had never been a head coach previously, but has admirably kept his job and developed his experience.

MOZAMBIQUE
(0 AFCON wins)

The Mambas are participating in a second successive tournament and a sixth overall but are yet to win a match at the finals. It will be hard for them to break that duck in a tough group, but they showed that they can be tricky opponents at the last edition, leading Egypt in their opening game until Mohamed Salah equalised from the penalty spot seven minutes into stoppage time. Mozambique secured their place in Morocco after defeating Lusophone rivals Guinea-Bissau 2-1 away in their final qualifier in November 2024. They continue to look for more talented players among those with Mozambican connections in Portugal, but the pickings have proven slim in comparison to countries like Angola and Cape Verde.

KEY PLAYER

Geny Catamo

Speedy striker, 24, who has been blossoming at Sporting in recent seasons and scored in the UEFA Champions League in October against Marseille.

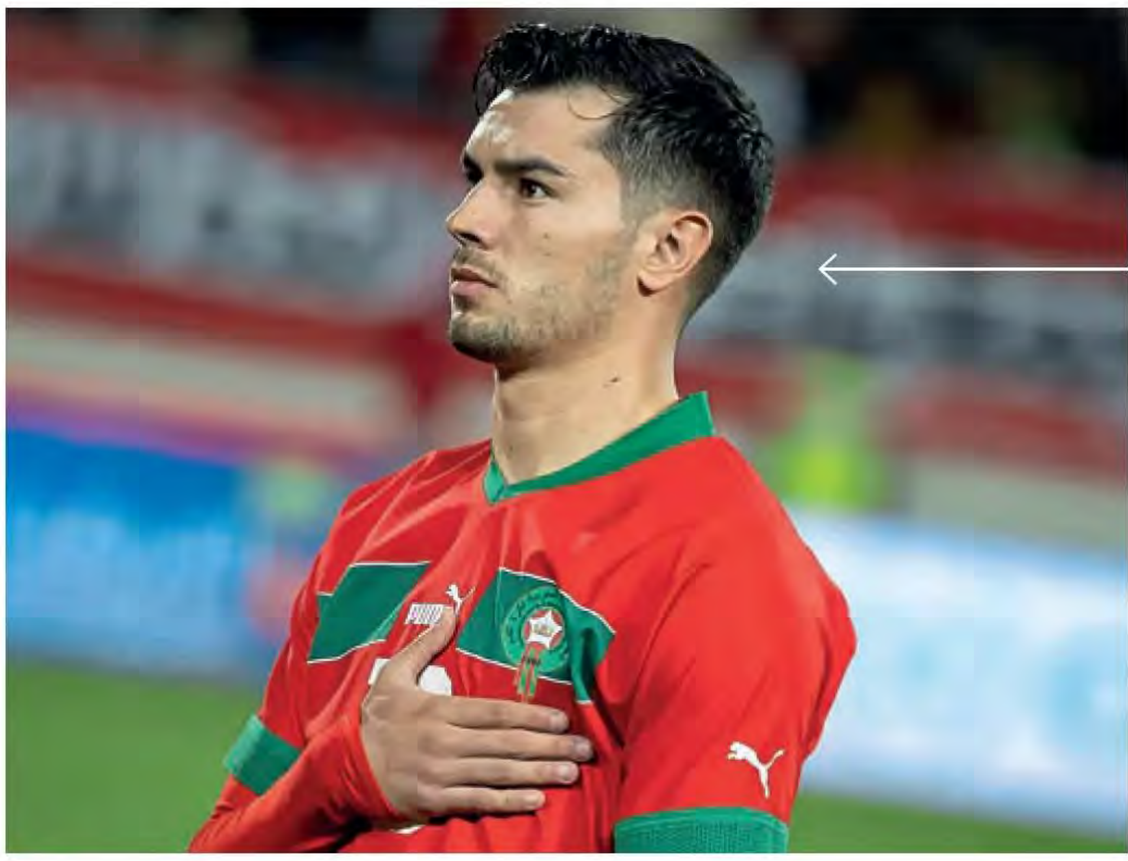
THE COACH

Chiquinho Conde

One of four brothers who played for Mozambique, the 60-year-old played in the country's first three AFCON appearances spread over 12 years between 1986 and 1998.

6 of the best AFCON ones to watch

Mark Gleeson picks out the stars with the potential to inspire their countries to glory in Morocco



1 Brahim DIAZ
MOROCCO

Morocco's new superstar is the 26-year-old Real Madrid attacking midfielder, despite him playing (and scoring) once for Spain in 2021. Atlas Lions coach Walid Regragui courted Brahim assiduously before finally convincing him to switch allegiance, though it was agreed that he could sit out the last Cup of Nations finals, with his delayed debut for Morocco coming in a friendly against Angola in March 2024. He scored seven goals in just four games in the AFCON qualifiers between September and November 2024 and also helped Morocco to an unbeaten 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign. Regragui failed in another bid to entice Lamine Yamal but in Diaz, who has also spent time with Manchester City and Milan, he has a player of genuine flair playing at Spain's other megaclub.

2 Iliman NDIAYE
SENEGAL

Senegal's talisman has long been Sadio Mane, but their real star over the past 12 months has been the Everton trickster, whose explosive running and silky skills proved key in helping the Lions of Teranga qualify for the 2026 World Cup. Ndiaye, 25, debuted for Senegal five months ahead of the last World Cup in Qatar, where he featured in three of their four games, and was used as an impact substitute in all of Senegal's games at the last Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast. Now though, he is very much a starter, usually on the right wing. Ndiaye grew up in France but went to school in England and first played senior football at Boreham Wood, before going on to Sheffield United and a one-season spell at Marseille before joining the Toffees.

3 Houssem AOUAR
ALGERIA

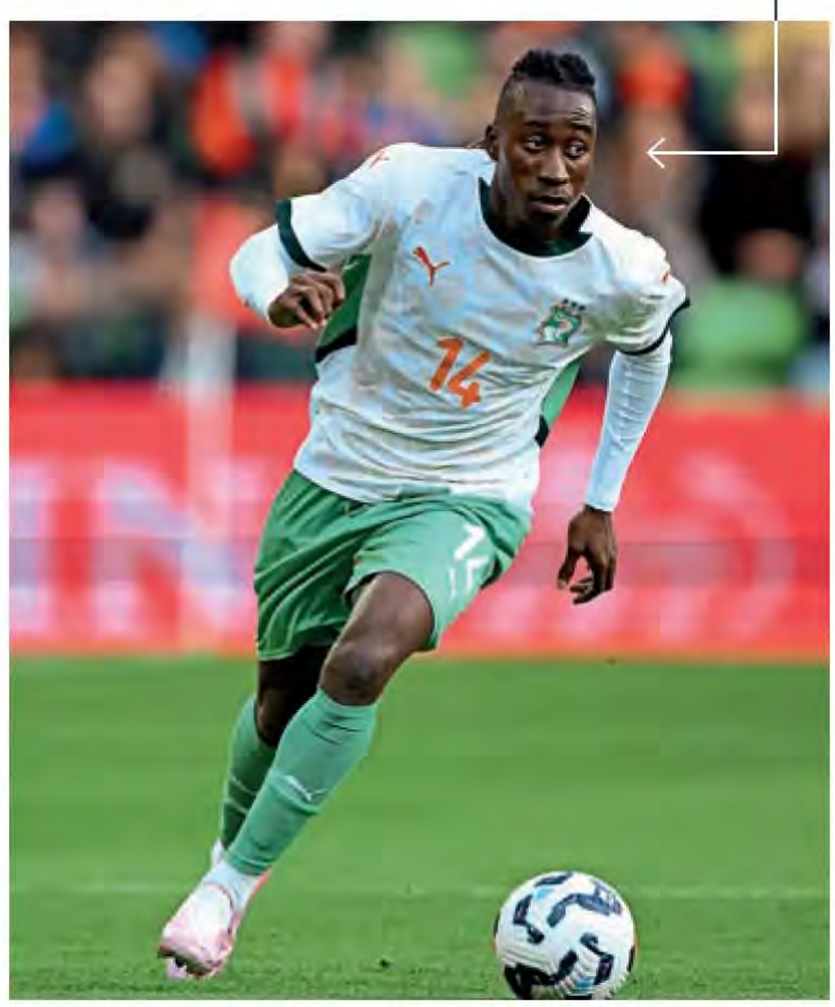
The French-born former Lyon midfielder has emerged as Algeria's chief playmaker, even if his number of caps have been restricted by niggling injuries. Aouar left Lyon after seven seasons for a single campaign in Serie A with Roma and then moved to Saudi Arabia in mid-2024, helping Al Ittihad to the league title last season, scoring 12 goals in the process. Aouar made a single appearance for France in a friendly against Ukraine in 2020 but switched to Algeria in mid-2023 and was in the squad that performed poorly at the last finals in the Ivory Coast when Algeria went home early. But the 27-year-old has since become a key element of the Fennecs' squad with goals in both the Cup of Nations and World Cup qualifying campaigns.

4 Mbekezeli MBOKAZI
SOUTH AFRICA

The young central defender only made his club debut at Orlando Pirates in March but has since not missed a game for the South African club, who reached last season's African Champions League semi-finals, also taking over the captaincy despite having only turned 20 in September. He has also been a national team regular since his debut in June, and after *Bafana Bafana* head coach Hugo Broos called for him to move overseas the Belgian got his wish. In December, MLS side Chicago Fire announced that they had signed Mbokazi for a reported fee of nearly $3m. Physically imposing, quick, and with a strong left foot capable of raking long-range passes, he will link up with his new team after the AFCON finals.

5 Yan DIOMANDE
IVORY COAST

The teenage winger was a last-minute call-up for the Ivory Coast's two World Cup qualifiers in October and made every use of the opportunity to put himself in contention for the Cup of Nations squad. Coach Emerse Fae had no hesitation in starting him, and was rewarded for his faith as Diomande scored on his debut v Seychelles and then against Kenya four days later. That instant international impact continued a process of rapid ascent for the 19-year-old; he made his La Liga debut for Leganes in March v Real Madrid, having been signed by the Spaniards from an academy in Daytona Beach, Florida, in a rather unusual route for top African talent. In July, RB Leipzig signed him for €20m, and he has wasted no time in making his mark in the Bundesliga.



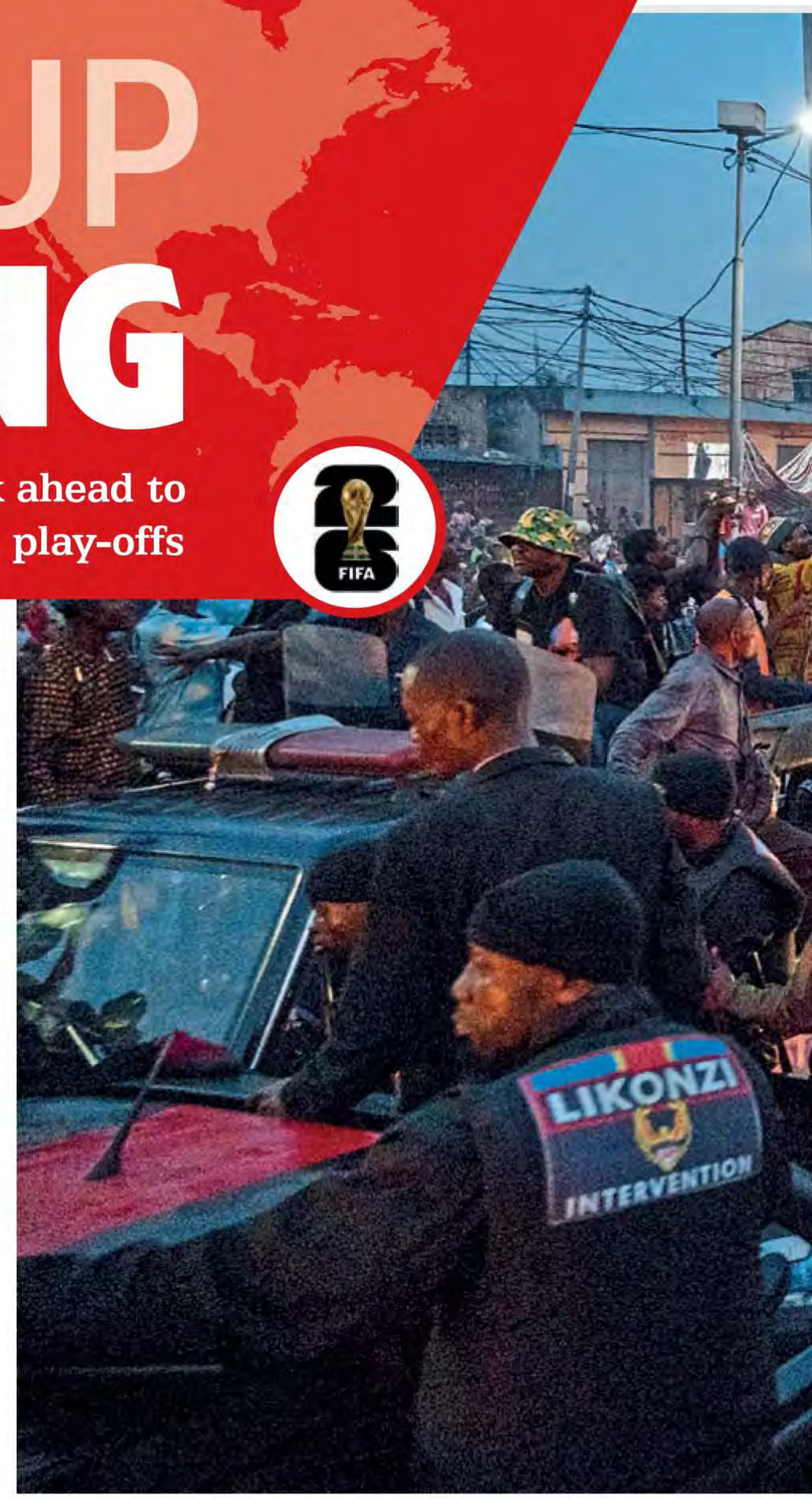
6 Kamory DOUMBIA
MALI

The 22-year-old scored eight goals in the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign – not bad for a midfielder. It should be no surprise, however, because in late 2023 he scored four goals in 26 first-half minutes for Brest against Lorient, the earliest four-goal haul in Ligue 1 history, shortly after arriving on loan from Reims. That move has since become permanent, and Doumbia is now a regular in the French league, while also becoming a key player for his country, Mali, who will be a strong outsider's tip for the Cup of Nations title. He earned the nickname "*W*" ("Spinning Top") in his formative years at the Jean-Marc Guillou Academy in Bamako, arriving at Reims in 2021 and making a first-team debut at the end of the 2021-22 season.

WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

A review of the action from November, and a look ahead to March's crucial European and inter-confederation play-offs

Heading to the play-offs... DR Congo will face New Caledonia or Jamaica in March



DR CONGO DELIVER

Congolese see off continental heavyweights Cameroon and Nigeria to seal Africa's spot in the inter-confederation play-offs in March

The Democratic Republic of the Congo will carry Africa's hopes of a tenth berth at the 2026 World Cup finals when they head to the inter-confederation play-offs in March.

It was more than half a century ago that the country, then known as Zaire, participated in the 1974 finals, at the time ridiculed for their tactical naivety and defensive frailties as they conceded 14 goals in three games and went home without scoring.

The African game has come a long way since then, and so too the Congolese, who eliminated both Cameroon and Nigeria in the November play-off tournament to keep their hopes alive.

The country is an African giant in terms of size, population and resources. But increasingly, like so many others, the football team are turning to the migrant populace in Europe for playing resources. Swiss-born goalkeeper Timothy Fayulu proved the hero as they edged out Nigeria on penalties in the shootout that followed a 1-1 draw after extra-time in the play-off final in Rabat. He was brought on minutes before the final whistle, and two saves in the shootout set up skipper Chancel Mbemba to convert the decisive kick.

Mbemba had also headed home a last-gasp winner to edge out Cameroon 1-0 in the second of the semi-finals three days earlier, while Nigeria needed extra-time to get the better of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's Gabon. The fact that Nigeria had an extra 30 minutes in their legs explained why DR Congo were able to dominate the play-off final.

Swiss-born goalkeeper Timothy Fayulu proved the hero as DR Congo edged out Nigeria on penalties

It was the first time that the African preliminaries for the World Cup offered a back-door entry for sides who had failed to win their groups. The November play-offs, all hosted in Morocco, were for the four best runners-up across the nine qualifying groups, whose winners are all headed to North America.

Gabon were the best of the second-placed sides, as they finished narrowly behind the Ivory Coast in Group F after winning eight of their ten matches. But the semi-final draw pitted them against Nigeria, who eventually overran them but not before a horror miss from Victor Osimhen that had it gone in would have spared the Super Eagles extra-time.

Osimhen was neutralised by the Congolese defence in the final just in much the same way they had effectively dealt with Cameroon's attack in their semi-final days earlier in a rainy Moroccan capital. The loss of Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa to a muscle

Heroes' welcome... DR Congo fans greet the national team in the capital Kinshasa after the play-off win over Nigeria

injury in training before the semi-final was a major blow and will likely be felt at the Cup of Nations finals too.

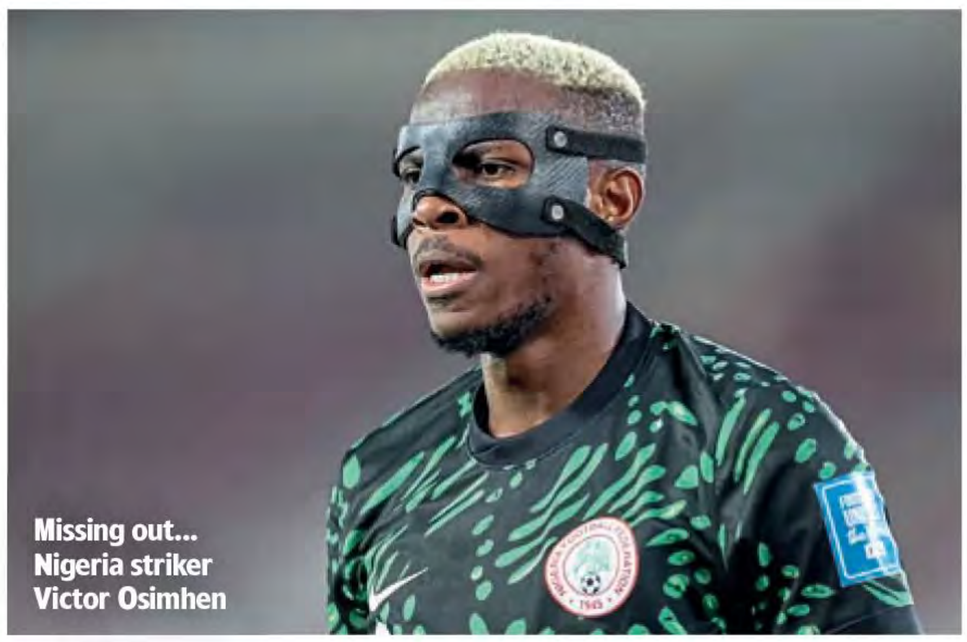
Between them, Cameroon and Nigeria have been to 14 World Cups, so their absence next summer will be marked even if there are many other African sides who will harbour high hopes of leaving their own mark on the tournament.

Morocco, after their run to the semi-finals in Qatar, are the obvious ones to watch and were the only team to conclude the African qualifiers with a 100% record – albeit they only played eight games in their group while the other group winners played ten.

Tunisia finished the qualifiers without conceding a goal in an African first, scoring 22 at the other end and picking up nine victories and a draw in Group H, ending a comfortable 13 points ahead of second-placed Namibia.

Egypt, the Ivory Coast and Senegal were the other countries to conclude their qualifying campaigns unbeaten, although both the Ivorians and Senegal only secured top spot in their respective groups following their last ties in October after being pushed all the way. Algeria and Ghana, who lost just once each, will join them on the plane to North America.

South Africa were belatedly sanctioned with a three-point deduction for using a suspended player in their March win over Lesotho, so their handy lead in Group C was turned over to Benin going into the last two rounds of qualifiers in October. But Benin had to go away to Nigeria in their last game, while South Africa had two "home" games – as neighbours Zimbabwe were using South African stadia in lieu of a ban on their facilities.



Missing out... Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen

Nevertheless, Zimbabwe held *Bafana Bafana* in Durban in their penultimate fixture and it was only because Nigeria hammered Benin 4-0 that South Africa were able to qualify, for the first time since 2010, by beating Rwanda 3-0 in Mbombela at the same time.

The tale of the African preliminaries, however, was undoubtedly Cape Verde and their first-ever qualification for the World Cup. They will be the only African newcomers at the finals – and what a fairy-tale story it will be.

Mark Gleeson

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1998

Three European sides return to the World Cup for the first time since France '98, alongside a raft of familiar giants

In a sure sign of impressive continuity at the highest level, Europe's three best performing sides from the last two World Cups were the quickest in the qualification stakes for next summer's FIFA jamboree. England were so dominant in their group that they had top spot sewn up with two games to spare, while Croatia and France both sealed the deal in the penultimate round of fixtures.

New England head coach Thomas Tuchel, as abrasive and uncompromising as ever, has assembled a well-balanced winning team in quick order and though he never would doubt that there is work still to do, the German must be delighted with his side's flawless numbers in Group K: eight wins out of eight, 22 goals scored and not one conceded. England are the first European team to play at least six World Cup qualifiers and win them all without conceding.

Norway also enjoyed a maximum points haul. The Norwegians, for whom the irrepressible Erling Haaland hit no fewer than 16 goals, ruled the roost in Group I from gun to tape, thus securing their first World Cup finals appearance since 1998. The highlights of Norway's campaign were undoubtedly the home and away victories over Italy: a 3-0 romp in Oslo in June followed by a 4-1 savaging of the *Azzurri* at the San Siro five months later.

Several nations stamped their ticket without defeat. Rarely required to move out of second gear, France qualified for their eighth straight World Cup and, with an extensive reservoir of talent to pick from, are bound to be a force to be reckoned with in North America.

Reigning European champions Spain went unvanquished too, only dropping points in their final fixture, a 2-2 draw in Sevilla against Turkey. *La Roja* have now gone 31 competitive games without losing, a sequence to be proud of. Croatia, inspired by the evergreen Luka Modric, made light work of devouring their opponents in Group L, only dropping two points in the process: a goalless draw away to runners-up Czech Republic.

Despite zero losses in finishing top of Group J, Belgium were far from convincing, frequently shaky in defence and firing blanks in two draws with North Macedonia. In the end, two thrilling wins against group runners-up Wales – 4-3 in Brussels and 4-2 in Cardiff – proved decisive for Rudi Garcia's side.

Scotland proved the surprise packages of the qualifiers, a team worth far more than the sum of their parts

Top scorer...Haaland's 16 goals powered Norway to the finals

Unbeaten Group G winners Netherlands often were in enigmatic mode, in the ascendency one moment, complacent the next. The squad, which includes the likes of Jurrien Timber, Virgil van Dijk, Ryan Gravenberch, Cody Gakpo, Tijjani Reijnders and Memphis Depay, is excellent, and if coach Ronald Koeman can harness that talent next summer the *Oranje* could prove a real force.

Switzerland, the model of understated efficiency, qualified for their sixth World Cup in a row with barely a bum note. With skipper Granit Xhaxa directing operations on the pitch and coach Murat Yakin off it, many will view the Swiss as dark horses in North America.

Big-hitters Germany and Portugal also stamped their tickets, though not without some missteps along the way. The *Nationalmannschaft's* 2-0 away loss to Slovakia in the opening round of fixtures had critics baying for blood, only for the damage to be slowly but surely repaired. Ironically, Germany saved their best performance for

Tartan party...Scott McTominay leads the Scottish celebrations

last in Group A, clinching top spot and a large portion of revenge with a 6-0 thrashing of the Slovaks in Leipzig.

While invariably a class apart in Group F, the Portuguese will not want to be reminded of their abject display in a 2-0 defeat to the Republic of Ireland, a game in which Cristiano Ronaldo was sent off for the first time in his Portugal career. A three-match ban would have put his World Cup in jeopardy, but FIFA opted to suspend his second and third matches for a year.

Through to their first World Cup in 28 long years, Scotland proved the surprise packages of the qualifiers, a team worth far more than the sum of their parts and never more dangerous than when written off. Steve Clarke's charges signed off an epic campaign with a thrilling 4-2 victory over Group C rivals Denmark in Glasgow, making history with stoppage-time goals from Kieran Tierney and Kenny McLean.

Austria, who needed a point from their final game against Bosnia & Herzegovina to win Group H, made heavy weather of it, a goal down for the majority of the match before a late Michael Gregoritsch equaliser. They also will now be heading to their first World Cup since 1998.

Nick Bidwell

PLAY-OFF REDEMPTION

Full of momentum... Republic of Ireland will be buoyed by their November wins

Momentum represents a huge factor in football, and it will be no different as European nations do battle in the 2026 World Cup play-offs in the spring. Group stage runners-up who ended their respective campaigns with a flourish should start the win-or-bust encounters with a marked psychological advantage; those who suffered late heartbreak or humiliation possibly have a mental mountain to climb.

Take Wales. Buoyed by their 7-1 thrashing of North Macedonia in the final group game, Craig Bellamy's side will be bursting with confidence when hosting Bosnia & Herzegovina in their play-off semi-final. And the same goes for the Republic of Ireland who, after claiming the scalp of mighty Portugal and winning in Hungary with a last-gasp Troy Parrott goal, will travel to the Czech Republic very much on a high.

Poland, due to entertain Albania, are another team on the up. Since replacing coach Michal Probierz with Jan Urban last summer, they've improved significantly, good enough to hold Group G winners Netherlands to draws both home and away. Turkey, who will be at home to Romania, seem in the ascendant too; they ended their group campaign with three wins and a morale-boosting 2-2 share of the spoils in Spain.

Play-offs beckon ...Italy could miss out on their third straight World Cup

On the flip side, a number of teams will have to deal with a group phase hangover. How will Denmark, held 2-2 at home by Belarus and then spectacularly coming unstuck in Scotland, react to throwing away direct qualification? Can Slovakia regroup in the wake of their 6-0 humbling in Germany? The Danes host a similarly shell-shocked North Macedonia, while Slovakia receive Kosovo.

No team in the play-offs will be under more pressure than four-time World Cup winners Italy, who after failing to qualify for Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022 face the calamitous prospect of an absentee hat-trick. Forced to play second fiddle to Norway this year, the *Azzurri* are now back in the dreaded repechage process, the high wire they fell off in the last two qualifying campaigns, losing to Sweden and North Macedonia respectively. Northern Ireland, their first play-off opponents, will be no pushovers.

In addition to the 12 group runners-up, FIFA also have handed play-off spots to the four best UEFA Nations League group winners who did not make the top-two cut in qualifying. Only time will tell if Romania, Sweden, Northern Ireland and North Macedonia can take advantage of this most convenient of back doors. Understandably, some see the move as controversial; Sweden, for example, finished rock-bottom and winless in their 2026 World Cup qualifying group, and so hardly resemble a team bristling with confidence as they prepare to go head-to-head in the play-offs with Ukraine.

At least the Swedes still have a shot. What would the likes of Serbia, Greece, Iceland, Hungary, Georgia, Slovenia and Finland, all of whom missed out completely, give to be in their shoes?

Nick Bidwell

CURACAO MAKE HISTORY

The Caribbean island secure their World Cup debut at the expense of Jamaica

Historic...Curacao celebrate becoming the smallest-ever World Cup qualifiers

The final round of 2026 World Cup qualifying in North, Central America and the Caribbean more than matched the drama elsewhere in the world, producing one tournament debutant, a long-time absentee returning despite not being able to play any games at home, and a high-profile managerial resignation.

There was plenty at stake in the last game of each of the three third-round groups. Three teams secured qualification for the final tournament, joining hosts Canada, Mexico and the United States as CONCACAF's representatives at the first 48-team World Cup, while two more entered the perilous inter-confederation play-offs.

It just so happens that the two best qualification stories from the region were linked by a shared home ground in the Curacao capital, Willemstad.

The Ergilio Hato Stadium served not just as a home for Curacao in Group B, but also for Haiti in Group C, who were unable to play games in their own country due to ongoing conflict and violence there.

The Haitian players were in Willemstad for their final game and, after securing a 2-0 win there against Nicaragua, huddled together waiting for the outcome of Honduras v Costa Rica. When news filtered through that the Hondurans had only managed a draw, meaning Haiti had secured World Cup qualification for the first time since 1974, there were wild celebrations on the pitch and in the stands.

There were celebrations outside the stadium in the Curacao capital, too, as the natives learned of their team's draw with Jamaica in Kingston, a result that was enough to see them become the smallest nation to ever qualify for a World Cup.

Potential for another upset was on the cards in Group A, as one of CONCACAF's South America-based nations, Suriname, had pushed top seeds and favourites Panama all the way at the top of the group.

Despite challenging Canada, Mexico and the United States to be considered among the top three nations in CONCACAF in recent times, Panama made hard work of this qualification process. This final round was the only window in which they managed to win both of their games, and accounted for two of just three victories in the six-game group. They emerged 3-2 victors in Guatemala following a late Jose Fajardo winner after the hosts had come back from 2-0 down in Guatemala City, before dispatching El Salvador more convincingly 3-0 on the final matchday.

Suriname's impressive displays in the group meant Panama's qualification was never certain, but the challengers will have to settle for a spot in the play-offs after losing 3-1 to Guatemala. Suriname's one goal in that match, an own goal from Nicolas Samayoa scored in the 93rd minute, was vital to getting that play-off spot, even though its importance didn't hit home at the time. Celebrations were muted as the goal was scored, but it meant that they progressed to the inter-confederation play-offs ahead of Honduras on goals scored.

Reaching the play-offs is still a big achievement for the nation currently ranked 123rd in the world, up from 144th at the start of this qualification campaign, but it was far less of an achievement for their fellow qualifiers, Jamaica.

The side managed by Steve McClaren were expected to qualify automatically, but a draw in Port of Spain against Trinidad & Tobago in the penultimate group game meant they needed a win at home to Curacao.

The two highest-scoring teams in this phase of qualifying could not muster a goal between them, but there was late drama when a stoppage-time penalty for Jamaica was overturned by VAR. Replays revealed Jeremy Antonisse had got the ball in his challenge on Dujuan Richards, and the 0-0 draw saw Curacao through.

Three teams secured qualification for the final tournament, joining hosts Canada, Mexico and the United States as CONCACAF's representatives at the first 48-team World Cup

Having not secured automatic qualification as expected, McClaren stepped down after the game, so Jamaica hired Rudolph Speid, coach of local side Cavalier, for the play-offs. They will face Oceania's representatives New Caledonia, with the winners taking on DR Congo.

James Nalton

IRAQ EDGE OUT UAE

The Lions of Mesopotamia will play in the inter-confederation play-offs after a narrow, nervy two-legged win over the United Arab Emirates

There was drama everywhere in November's qualifiers for the 2026 World Cup but while there was only one head-to-head in Asia, it didn't disappoint. Iraq and the United Arab Emirates met in the two-legged fifth round and it went right down to the wire – the 17th minute of added time in the return match. That was when, somehow, Amir Al Ammari kept his nerve from the penalty spot to give Iraq a famous win.

The 62,000 fans in Basra celebrated, not a place in North America – though you may have thought that was the case given the delight and excitement in the southern port city – but progress to the inter-confederation play-off round in March. On this showing, a return to the global stage for the first time since their 1986 debut is very much on.

It has been a long road. Iraq and UAE finished third in the third round of qualifiers back in June, behind the top two that went automatically to the World Cup. They then finished second in October's fourth round, behind Saudi Arabia and Qatar respectively, who also booked their places next summer. This was their final chance.

Both had grizzled coaches at the helm. The UAE had brought in Cosmin Olaroiu, a Romanian with a long record of club success in the region, while Iraq hired Graham Arnold, the Australian who led the Socceroos through the play-offs to the 2022 World Cup.

The first game was in front of a sell-out crowd of over 30,000 fans in Abu Dhabi and ended 1-1. Although Iraq opened the scoring, the UAE were disappointed not to come away with an advantage. Luton Town forward Ali Al Hamadi struck in the tenth minute to silence the home fans but Luanzinho, one of several South American-born players (mostly Brazilian) in the UAE line-up, headed home powerfully after the break. Caio Lucas had a stoppage-time goal ruled out by VAR meaning that it was all square as the teams headed northwest to Basra.

> **On this showing, a return to the global stage for the first time since Iraq's 1986 debut is very much on**

There, UAE took the lead after 52 minutes thanks to a smart finish from Lucas. But midway through the second half, Mohanad Ali made it all square on the night and in the tie. Long-held World Cup dreams – the UAE were last there in 1990 – hung in the balance, but in the 99th minute there was a handball. A lengthy VAR stoppage ended with an Iraqi penalty and in the 107th minute, Al Ammari stepped up. Plenty couldn't watch, including Arnold, but the Poland-based midfielder, who plays for Cracovia, held his nerve.

Basra went crazy and while the coach joined in, he was soon trying to keep a lid on things. "We still haven't qualified for the World Cup," Arnold said. "Keep supporting the players, the road is long, but the goal is achievable."

It was a far cry from October when the 62-year-old manager, rightfully, complained about the format of the fourth round that contained two groups of three with the winners qualifying. Saudi Arabia and Qatar had not just been given home advantage by the Asian Football Confederation but were also able to enjoy six days' rest between their two games in Jeddah and Doha while their opponents had just three. Saudi Arabia qualified above Iraq by virtue of goals scored. A return leg in Basra could have made the difference and the UAE, who finished second, a point behind Qatar, felt the same.

For the UAE, the turn to South American players who have played in the country's league has not worked this time. But there is, at least, the Asian Cup to think about just a few months after the World Cup concludes. Iraq now have other things on their minds and, with this mentality and passion, the Lions of Mesopotamia could go all the way to North America.

John Duerden

Goalscoring hero... Iraq's Mohanad Ali celebrates in Basra

Glenn Moore

NWSL final prompts play-off questions

Kansas City Current miss out on the National Women's Soccer League title despite finishing miles clear at the top of the table

Who were the best team in the National Women's Soccer League in 2025?

The answer is surely Kansas City Current, the team that wrapped up the regular season Shield with weeks to spare, creating new records for most points, most wins and most clean sheets. The team that produced the top scorer and five of the eight MVP nominees. The team that finished a massive 21 points clear in a 26-match season with a +36 goal difference.

The record books though, despite the many new entries the Current made in it, say otherwise. The NWSL 2025 champions are Gotham FC, who beat Washington Spirit in the Championship match in San Jose. Kansas City? They didn't even make the best four.

However, play-offs carry a considerable risk of failing to reward the best, especially in the NWSL format.

In the 14-club league, eight clubs, more than half, qualify (in France four do so from 12). It is then a straight knockout 1st v 8th, 2nd v 7th and so on. The higher finisher gets home advantage, but no more.

So Kansas played Gotham, who finished 29 points adrift. And they lost.

Kansas were without Temba Chawinga, who led the scoring charts with 15 goals, and it showed. Gotham were themselves without Spaniard Esther Gonzalez, who was second to Chawinga with 13 regular-season goals, but that affected their gameplan less. Though Ellie Wheeler struck late on to cancel out Jaedyn Shaw's 68th-minute strike, Katie Stengel won the match at the very last, in time added on in extra-time.

> Play-offs carry a considerable risk of failing to reward the best, especially in the NWSL format

To explain: as with most American sports, the NWSL has a regular season, followed by a play-off series to decide the title winners, concluding in a final.

It makes commercial sense, increasing the number of meaningful matches and providing a focal climax which this year drew record viewing figures peaking at more than 1.5 million and averaging 1,184,000, 22% up on last year, 45% up on 2023.

In a season like this, with runaway winners, no relegation, and CONCACAF W Champions Cup qualification lacking the cachet of qualifying for UEFA's Champions League, the back half of the campaign would hold minimal interest without a play-off system.

Indeed, there's an argument that European leagues that produce the same champion year after year could adopt play-offs. France's Premiere Ligue did this, for example, after Lyon won 16 titles in 17 seasons.

Gotham followed up by winning at the defending champions Orlando Pride, despite not having a shot on target until the 97th-minute, which is when Shaw's cross-cum-shot free-kick crept inside the far post.

NWSL victors... Gotham FC were crowned champions after the play-offs

Washington Spirit, who came second in the regular season, albeit a long way adrift of Current, saw off third-placed Portland Thorns in the other semi-final.

In the final Gotham edged a third narrow victory, their star Rose Lavelle scoring on the counter-attack in the 80th minute while Spirit's star player, the injured Trinity Rodman, played an ineffective half-hour cameo off the bench. Gotham were thus champions and earned themselves an invite to New York's City Hall.

Gotham have form for this. In 2023 they came from sixth (which was then the last play-off slot) to win the title. That led to arguments between Casey Stoney, then the coach of regular season winners San Diego Wave, and the US media over who were the real champions.

Stoney, a product of the English game, insisted it was Wave, and felt vindicated when Wave beat Gotham in the 2024 Challenge Cup seasonal curtain-raiser.

There may be a similar edge when Current take on Gotham in the 2026 Challenge Cup as the final must have been a galling watch for the team and their fans, who sold out every match at their purpose-built 11,500 stadium.

Former US coach Vlatko Andonovski built a well-organised side that defended well and utilised Malawian Chawinga and Brazil's Bia Zaneratto in transition, supported by winger Michelle Cooper and another Brazilian, Debinha.

Tripped up...Kansas City Current were tripped up in the NWSL play-offs

Behind them, US internationals Lo'eau LaBonta and precocious teenager Claire Hutton bossed the midfield and Kayla Sharples marshalled the defence with a third Brazilian, goalkeeper Lorena, completing a strong spine.

Full-backs Izzy Rodriguez and Hailie Mace also provided 11 assists between them. Yet with Chawinga and Cooper injured against Gotham it wasn't enough.

"Our players can walk with their heads up," said Andonovski afterwards, noting that one bad result should not detract from "everything else that they did in these 27 games."

It was the ninth time in 12 seasons that the regular season Shield winners have failed to take the play-off series. North Carolina Courage did it in 2018 and 2019 and Orlando Pride in 2024. Laura Harvey's Seattle-based Reign have thrice been denied after winning the regular campaign.

It's the rule they sign up to, and an American competition is unlikely to change policy, especially with NWSL needing a showpiece final to compete in a very competitive landscape.

But there is a strong argument that too many teams make the end-of-season play-offs and the regular season winners are poorly rewarded.

The former is unlikely to change given Boston Legacy and Denver Summit are joining in 2026 to make a 16-club league.

NWSL could, however, give the winners more advantages – some formats provide a bye or second chance to the top two.

It's not perfect, but once you have play-offs no system is; they are always going to be a compromise between fairness and maximising commercial revenues. The French system has not, so far, stopped OL Lyonnes winning, but there is now some jeopardy at the end of the season.

That said, the current system seems to work for NWSL which, after years of scraping by, is booming.

There remains concern about the drain of players, notably to England, with Alyssa Thompson following Catarina Macario and Naomi Girma to Chelsea, and Jenna Nighswonger joining Emily Fox at Arsenal. In addition, Korbin Shrader is now playing with USWNT captain Lindsay Heaps and Lily Yohannes at OL Lyonnes.

But Atlanta have signed to become the 17th franchise for a reported $165m expansion fee, hugely up on the $110m Denver's invested just a year ago never mind the $2m Angel City paid back in 2020. The team will launch in 2028 under an ownership group that already runs the successful MLS club Atlanta United and NFL's Atlanta Falcons.

Round-up

2025 UEFA Nations League winners...Spain

SPAIN RETAIN UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE CROWN

Spain shook off the shock of losing Aitana Bonmati, who will be out until at least May with a broken leg sustained in training, to retain their UEFA Nations League title with a 3-0 aggregate victory over Germany.

The Germans dominated the first leg in Kaiserslauten but a combination of poor finishing, the woodwork and Cata Coll's goalkeeping kept the match goalless. It remained that way until the 61st minute of the second leg at Atletico Madrid's Metropolitano when Claudia Pina broke the deadlock. A goal by teenager Vicky Lopez and a second from Pina confirmed the result.

MOROCCANS AGAIN WINNERS IN AFRICAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

AS FAR regained the African Women's Champions League title with a 2-1 win over ASEC Mimosas of Ivory Coast.

The Moroccans, champions in 2022, had beaten DR Congo's TP Mazembe 4-2 on penalties after a goalless semi-final, while Mimosas defeated Egyptian hosts FC Masar 1-0.

In the final there was more penalty success, this time in normal time with Hanane Ait El Haj and Zineb Redouani, who'd both converted successfully in the semi, scoring from the spot either side of a reply from Ami Prisca Diallo.

The final was watched by a disappointingly low crowd of just 150 in Ismailia, Egypt.

Eight teams took part in the finals, four of whom were making their debuts, although ASEC were the only one of those teams to make it out of the group stages. The other three semi-finalists had also made the last four in 2024.

Euro 2029 hosts...Germany

GERMANY TO HOST EURO 2029

Germany were a resounding pick as the 2029 European Championship hosts, winning 15 of the 17 UEFA exco votes. A joint Sweden-Denmark bid earned two votes and Poland zero.

The Germans will be eyeing a unique hat-trick after previously staging the Euros in 2001 and, as West Germany, in 1989, and winning the tournament on both occasions.

FIRST CANADIAN PRO TITLE WON BY VANCOUVER RISE

AFC Toronto won the inaugural Northern Super League regular season by a 12-point margin, but were beaten 2-1 by Vancouver Rise in a final interrupted by a break for a lightning storm.

Hosts Toronto took the lead with the 16th goal of the campaign by 17-year-old Kaylee Hunter, but in the second half a Nikki Stanton corner was allowed to sneak in at the near post before Holly Ward scored a breakaway winner.

Hunter and Ward are two players whose emergence has highlighted the positive impact Canada's new professional platform, which has met the high expectations of its founders, can have.

Inaugural Canadian champions...Vancouver Rise players celebrate

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South America

TIM VICKERY

5 Things...

...from the 2025 club season in South America

1 ACOSTA'S BLUSHES SPARED

Briefly an Argentina international in 2017, attacking midfielder Lautaro Acosta has spent much longer in the maroon shirt of Lanus. He started there back in 2006 and, after five years away, returned in 2013. Acosta has played more games than anyone else for the self-styled "biggest neighbourhood club in the world" and has been part of many of their titles, including the Copa Sudamericana win of 2013. He will retire at the end of 2025, and had the perfect chance to sign off in style.

With the 2025 Sudamericana final against Atletico Mineiro goalless, Acosta came on in the 119th minute, just for the shootout, and took the fifth penalty. If he scored, Lanus would be champions. It was a huge moment. With the adrenalin pumping, the 37-year-old calibrated wrongly and fired over the crossbar.

At that point it looked as if Atletico would prevail, but Acosta's team-mates bailed him out, rallying to win the shootout and give coach Mauricio Pellegrino his first title, ensuring there is no blemish on the statue of Acosta that stands outside the club's stadium.

Spot-kick failure ...Lautaro Acosta skies his penalty in the Copa Sudamericana final shootout

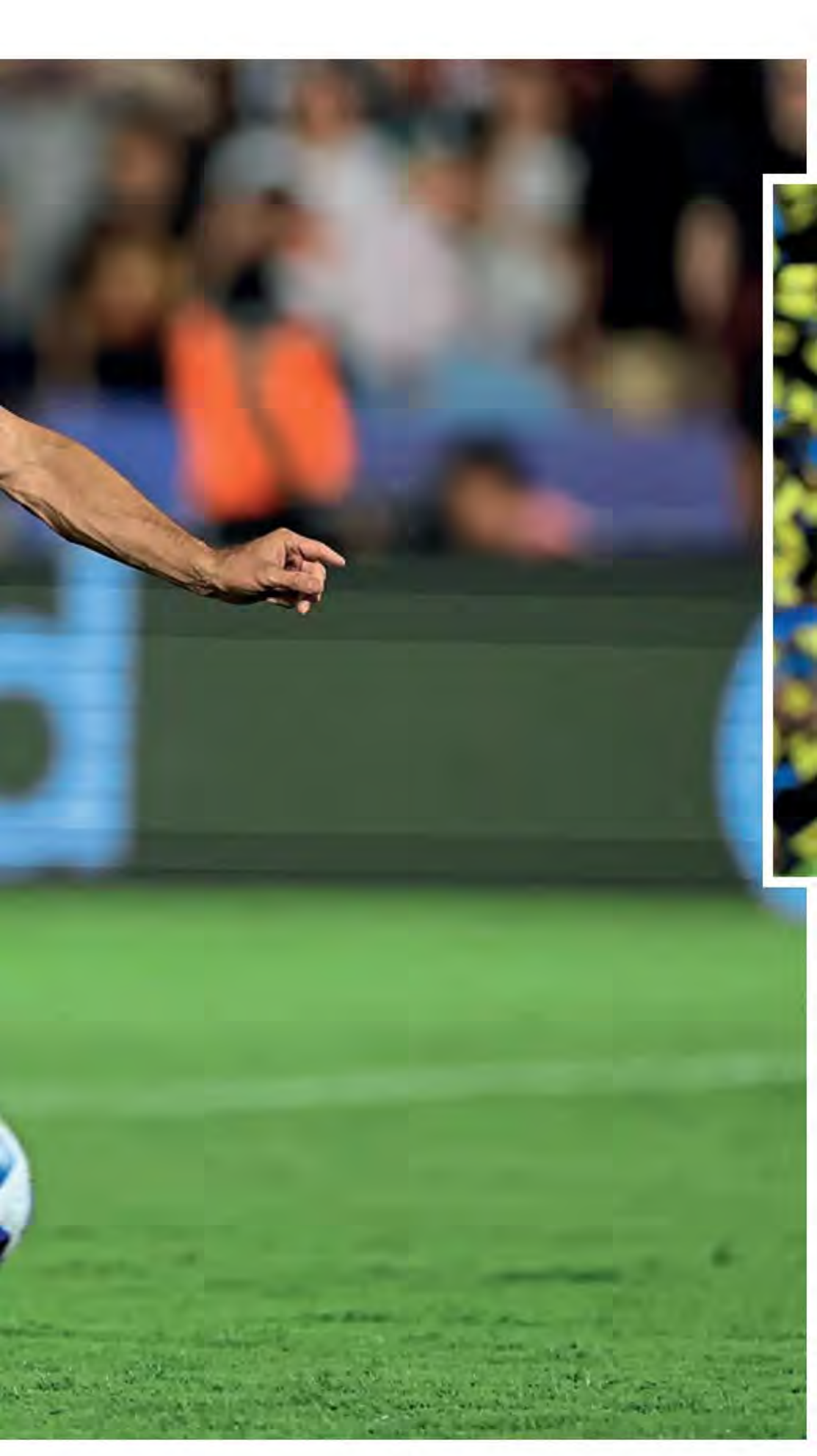
End of an era? ...Hulk with his runners-up medal

2 END OF AN ERA AT ATLETICO MINEIRO?

Losing was a bitter disappointment for Atletico. In 2024 they staked the year on the Liberatores final and were well beaten, and this time they did the same with the Sudamericana. Although they had the better of the game and the bulk of the few clear chances on a hot afternoon in Asuncion, Paraguay, they could not force the victory.

More was expected after the Hulk-inspired league and cup double in 2021. Despite unveiling their new stadium in 2023, subsequent results have been disappointing – and the fact that Hulk had his spot-kick saved may well mark the end of an era.

The Sudamericana has now gone to Argentina two years in a row, and to Ecuador in the two years before that – each time with a Brazilian side losing in the final. But this latest defeat was a



Homecoming hero...Rosario Central's Angel Di Maria

blow to one Argentine: Atletico coach Jorge Sampaoli. Ten years ago he took Chile to triumph in the Copa America and then did well with Sevilla. The Barcelona job seemed his for the taking. Instead, he had a disastrous spell with Argentina and three unsuccessful attempts at European club football, and has spent much of his time since bouncing around Brazilian clubs. Sudamericana glory would have given his career a welcome boost.

3 COQUIMBO UNIDO WIN STUNNING CHILEAN TITLE

One of South American club football's biggest stories of 2025 was the way that Coquimbo Unido strolled to their first Chilean league title, wrapping things up with four rounds to spare. Esteban Gonzalez became the first Chilean coach to win the Liga de Primera title for nine years, drilling his men into an effective unit which conceded half as many goals as anyone else.

Located some 300 miles north of Santiago, Coquimbo is old pirate territory. Legend has it that Francis Drake left some buried treasure there. Since their foundation in 1958, *Los Piratas* have often found themselves in choppy waters – never more so than in 2020, when they reached the semi-finals of the Sudamericana and managed to get relegated a few weeks later.

This year's achievement is undoubtedly a special triumph – with just a little shine taken off it. The 2025 season highlights both the relentless efficiency of winners Coquimbo, and the continuing problems of the traditional Santiago giants. Only three times in the last ten years has a Chilean side made it out of the group phase of the Copa Libertadores – with Colo-Colo and Universidad de Chile the latest to fail – a desperately poor record, which Coquimbo will hope to improve in 2026.

4 UNEXPECTED HONOURS FOR ROSARIO CENTRAL

Also title winners were Rosario Central in Argentina – with the added curiosity that they won a title without being aware of its existence.

Like many leagues across South America, the season in Argentina is divided into two separate championships – an Apertura and Clausura – where, in both, a league phase leads to a knockout round conclusion. After the second league phase had been completed, the local FA decided that the team that had accumulated most points over the year would be crowned overall champions – and so, at the stroke of a pen, Rosario had something extra to celebrate, over and above the triumphant return home of Angel Di Maria.

Awarding a retrospective league title inevitably proved controversial. Central's next match, in the first round of the Clausura knockout rounds, was against Estudiantes. The visiting players were supposed to form a guard of honour to welcome the new champions out onto the pitch, but Estudiantes made their feelings clear by doing it with their backs turned. And they had the last laugh, too, inflicting the first defeat that Central had suffered with Di Maria on the field, and gleefully knocking the Argentine champions out of the Argentine championship.

5 UNIVERSITARIO'S PERUVIAN DOMINANCE CONTINUES

An even more bizarre title win was that of Alianza Lima in Peru back in 2021. They had suffered a shock relegation the previous year, and started the season in the second division. But they argued that another club, Carlos Stein, should have been docked points for financial irregularities. The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) upheld their case, and so Alianza were reinstated – and ended up winning a competition in which they had not originally been taking part. They defended the title the following year, but maybe they had been storing up some bad karma.

At that point Alianza had 25 titles, one behind historical rivals Universitario. Since then, though, it has been one-way traffic. Uruguayan coach Jorge Fossati built a combative team on a model that worked so well that Universitario kept on winning after he left to take charge of the national team, and they have kept winning since his return. The 2025 title came easily, with no need for a play-off after they won both the Apertura and Clausura. After three titles in a row, Universitario are now on 29, four ahead of Alianza, and also became the first Peruvian side to make it out of the group phase of the Libertadores in over a decade.

Read Tim Vickery's full review of the South American domestic season in next month's issue.

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

5 Things...

...from Europe's 2025 summer leagues

Record-breaking champions... Shamrock Rovers celebrate winning the 2025 League of Ireland title

1 RECORD CHAMPIONS

The League of Ireland's most decorated club with 22 titles, Shamrock Rovers claimed their fifth domestic crown in the last six seasons. So dominant were Stephen Bradley's side that they could even afford a late blip of three straight defeats before hauling themselves over the line thanks to a 1-0 home win over Galway United in their penultimate league fixture of the season.

Flora Tallinn, the most successful side in the history of Estonia's Meistriliiga, struck gold for the 16th time – though it was nip and tuck throughout, with closest rivals FCI Levadia breathing down their necks right until the end. Full marks to Flora boss Konstantin Vassiljev in what was his debut season as head coach. Once a fine attacking midfielder and captain of the Estonia national team, winning a record 159 caps, Vassiljev won the league title seven times as a player, including four with Flora.

2 NEW FRONTIER CHAMPIONS

In existence for a little more than a couple of decades, the Green-Whites of Kauno Zalgiris won their first-ever Lithuanian A Lyga title at a canter, finishing a comfortable eight points clear of second-placed Hegelmann. Kaunas Zalgiris had been knocking on the door for quite some time, third in the A Lyga in 2020, 2021 and 2024 and runners-up in 2022.

Brand-new league champions also announced themselves in Belarus, where elite rookies ML Vitebsk sensationally made history by becoming the first newly promoted club to claim a national championship in Europe since 2019. Ararat-Armenia were the last club to achieve such a feat, winning the top-flight title in Armenia at the first time of asking just two years after being formed.

The usual order was turned upside down in Sweden too, with Mjallby, a team from a tiny fishing village, only losing once in taking possession of their first Allsvenskan flag.

Swedish champions... Mjallby sports director Hasse Larsson and title-winning coach Anders Torstensson

3 EMPHATIC LEAGUE WINNERS

Reykjavik outfit Vikingur made off with their eighth national title, blowing the opposition out of the water with five wins out of five in the end-of-term

Finnish league champion...KuPS coach Jarkko Wiss

championship round. Vikingur's most influential performers were veteran ex-Everton and Tottenham Hotspur midfielder Gylfi Sigurdsson, raiding left-back Helgi Gudjonsson and Danish striker Nicolaj Hansen.

Runaway Faroe Islands champions KI Klaksvik became the only team in a European summer league to remain unbeaten for the whole season. KI, who have not lost a home game since August 2024, were especially indebted to national team winger Arni Frederiksberg, who scored 18 league goals and created just as many. Whenever KI needed a goal in a tight encounter, they turned to the all-singing, all-dancing Frederiksberg – and invariably he delivered.

4 BACK-TO-BACK VICTORS

Placed only fourth at the end of the regular Finnish league (Veikkausliiga) season, defending champions KuPS, shrewdly led by head coach Jarkko Wiss, came into their own in the subsequent top-six mini-league, losing just once in ten games as they accelerated past Inter Turku, Ilves and HJK. After title triumphs in 2019 and 2024, this was a third league title this century for KuPS (aka Kuopion Palloseura), whose previous crowns all were acquired between 1956 and 1976. This was the Canaries' first-ever successful title defence.

Kairat – who this season became only the second club from Kazakhstan to play in the Champions League group stage following in Astana's footsteps from 2015-16 – once again took the best in show honours in the country's Premier League. They clinched the crown on the last day of the season with a 1-1 draw at home to Astana, who finished as runners-up. Kairat's equaliser in that game was netted by starlet forward, Dastan Satpayev, who is due to join Chelsea soon.

5 CLOSE-RUN AFFAIRS

The destination of the Norwegian Eliteserien title was only decided on the final weekend, with Stavanger outfit Viking ultimately finishing just one point ahead of dethroned champions Bodo/Glimt. Historically one of Norway's most successful clubs with eight championships before this season, Viking had been surviving on short rations since their last league triumph in 1991 and were even relegated from the top flight in 2017. Slowly but surely they have recovered, much of the renaissance down to current joint-bosses Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim and Morten Jensen.

In the Latvian championship race there was little to separate capital city foes Riga and RFS, with the former prevailing by a point. In the tale of the tape, RFS had the more prolific attack – spearheaded by Serbian striker Darko Lemajic – whereas Riga proved better defensively, losing just two games all season, three fewer than their rivals.

On the rise...Kairat forward Dastan Satpayev helped his club achieve back-to-back titles in Kazakhstan

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from the 2025 leagues around the Far East

Chinese Super League champions... Shanghai Port beat neighbours Shenhua to the title yet again

1 POYET LEADS JEONBUK BACK TO THE TOP IN SOUTH KOREA'S K-LEAGUE

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors won their first title in 2009 and then proceeded to win eight more by 2021. In recent years, however, the crown slipped. Second in 2022 was okay but that was followed by fourth, then tenth (in a 12-team league) in 2024 and a surprise relegation scrap.

In came Gus Poyet 12 months ago. The Uruguayan's coaching career has been long and varied in terms of countries – Brighton, Sunderland, AEK Athens, Real Betis, Shanghai Shenhua, Bordeaux and Universidad Catolica – winning trophies in England (the League One title with Brighton in 2010-11) and Chile (the Supercopa with Universidad Catolica in 2020).

Now there's more. This emphatic league title win, clinched with games to spare, was built on a solid defence, led by veteran centre-backs Park Jin-seob and Hong Jeong-ho, and Jeon Jin-woo up front – with the latter earning interest from West Bromwich Albion.

There weren't many superstars, but it was a solid team performance to earn *La Decima* for Jeonbuk and a first top-flight league title for Poyet.

Title winner... Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors manager Gustavo Poyet

2 BIG CLUBS STILL STRUGGLING IN KOREA

It has been a regular feature of the K-League in recent years that powerhouses have struggled. This season's champions Jeonbuk finished two places off the bottom in 2024 and only avoided the drop after winning a relegation play-off; four-time champions Suwon Samsung Bluewings were sent down in 2023; while six-time national champions FC Seoul have become used to bottom-half finishes in recent years.

This time it was the turn of Ulsan HD. The Tigers won three championships in a row between 2022 and 2024 and looked like establishing a Jeonbuk-like dynasty, but this season their form really dropped and, in the end, just two points separated the five-time champions from the relegation play-offs.

Losing coach Hong Myung-bo to the national team in the summer of 2024 was a painful and disruptive experience. His replacement Kim Pan-gon lasted a year and then Shin Tae-yong, Taeguek Warriors head coach at the 2018 World Cup, lasted just two months as the club slipped into a relegation battle.

The people's game...Chinese football fans

Struggling...former Japanese champions Yokohama F. Marinos had a tough season

3 SHANGHAI PORT EDGE OUT NEIGHBOURS AGAIN

The title race in the Chinese Super League was much closer than in the K-League, going down to the final day for the second successive season. And, for the second year in a row, Shanghai Port saw off their neighbours Shanghai Shenhua, clinching their third title in a row with a 1-0 win at Dalian Yingbo.

It marked a fifth championship in total for head coach Kevin Muscat. The 52-year-old won two in his native Australia with Melbourne Victory, took Yokohama F. Marinos to the 2022 J. League and now has two in China.

Shenhua's consecutive second-place finish will hurt – and not just because they finished behind their big rivals. The Blues have been champions just once in the professional era (and that was 30 years ago) but have now been runners-up on no fewer than ten occasions. It is, at least, something to build on for coach Leonid Slutsky and it could be third time lucky next time especially if Muscat, recently closely linked with Rangers, is looking to move on to pastures new.

4 ENCOURAGING SEASON FOR CHINESE FANS

Much has been written about the trials and tribulations of Chinese football, from the failure of the national team to qualify for the World Cup, yet again, to the struggles of its clubs in the AFC Champions League and the financial issues at home. Yet the average attendance in the 2025 season was close to 26,000. This is not just the best in Asia but also higher than a decade ago when clubs were splashing the cash and bringing in big superstars.

With the sudden growth and success of regional leagues in the country, there is a sense of something stirring. The big names may have gone and the standard may not quite be what it was (results in Asia show that) but there is still a love for the game. That may not make international headlines but it does provide some optimism to keep fans going until it all starts again.

5 J. LEAGUE COMPETITIVE AT THE TOP AND BOTTOM

While the J. League offered an exciting title race – six clubs were still in the hunt with a quarter of the season to go before Kashiwa Reysol and Kashima Antlers took it to the final day – the relegation battle was settled with games to spare, albeit not without a few scares along the way. Albirex Niigata, Shonan Bellmare and Yokohama FC went down but there were two ex-champions who hovered a little too close to the trapdoor for comfort.

Yokohama F. Marinos were in real trouble at one stage – incredible for a team that Ange Postecoglou and Kevin Muscat led to the 2019 and 2022 titles respectively, and Harry Kewell took to the 2024 AFC Champions League final. The Blues rallied late on but it should serve as a wake-up call. 2010 champions Nagoya Grampus also struggled and it all serves as a reminder that the J. League is one of the most competitive and open in the world, and that is the case at the bottom as well as the top.

Read our full J. League season review in next month's issue.

Canada

JOHN MOLINARO

'Icycle Kick' gives Atletico Ottawa famous title win

David Rodriguez makes headlines with stunning brace in snow-covered Canadian Premier League play-off final

Forge FC have dominated the Canadian Premier League (CPL) since its launch in 2019, winning the North Star Cup as league champions four times and reaching the play-off final on two other occasions.

The 2025 season kicked off in April and when Forge began the campaign with a record 20-match unbeaten run – the first of their two losses came at the end of August – it looked like it would be seven out of seven CPL finals for the club from the steel city of Hamilton, Ontario.

But Forge peaked too early and lost to Atletico Ottawa (owned by Atletico Madrid of Spain) 2-1 in the play-off semi-finals, and their reign of league domination came to a screeching halt.

It has to be said that Forge's absence from the 2025 CPL final was hardly missed, as the two finalists served up a contest that went down as an instant classic in the annals of Canadian soccer history.

Ottawa hosted Calgary-based Cavalry FC amidst a heavy snowstorm in the Canadian capital. The -2°C temperatures, blistering winds and heavy snowfall turned TD Place Stadium into a winter wonderland, the pitch transformed into a pure white canvas that was brilliantly juxtaposed by the neon-orange ball and both teams' colourful jerseys. The match was halted by the referee several times so that the stadium crew could clear the lines on the snow-covered pitch – even Atletico goalkeeper Nathan Ingham pitched in and grabbed a shovel. Extra-time was delayed by just over an hour as snowploughs cleared the pitch of the accumulated downfall while the players rested in the locker room.

Atletico eventually emerged victorious 2-1 in a dramatic affair thanks to a brace from David Rodriguez, which included a sensational bicycle kick – coined the "Icicle Kick" – that immediately went viral around the world and generated over one billion views on social media, according to the league.

Ottawa joined an elite group that included Cavalry (last season's champions), Forge and Pacific FC as the only teams to win the CPL title.

That the CPL even kicked off its seventh season this year is a testament to its lasting power and durability. After an impressive inaugural campaign, the upstart league's momentum was halted by the global pandemic the following year. The 2020 season was condensed to five weeks and took place behind closed doors in Prince Edward Island, the smallest of Canada's ten provinces, which doesn't even boast a CPL team.

But the league came out stronger on the other side and has continued to show steady growth ever since, silencing the critics who questioned its viability in a country where ice hockey is the national obsession.

That's not to say the CPL doesn't face challenges going forward.

While Atletico, Forge, Cavalry and HFX Wanderers have strong attendance numbers, the same can't be said for Valour FC, Vancouver FC and York United. Those three clubs are essentially non-entities in their local sports markets and struggle to meet the standards set by the league's other five teams. In November, Valour announced it was folding after the league had been covering its operating costs since 2024. Valour are the second CPL team to close up shop in seven years – FC Edmonton shut down after the 2022 season.

"The league has explored multiple avenues to maintain the club's

> The finalists served up a contest that went down as an instant classic in the annals of Canadian soccer history

Two-goal hero... Atletico Ottawa's David Rodriguez scores in the CPL final *Credit: Alamy*

viability, engaging in discussions with potential investors and evaluating all feasible operational models," the CPL said. "After review, it became clear that there is no sustainable path forward for Valour FC at this time."

SixFive Sports & Entertainment, the ownership group of Pacific, announced in September that it was exploring a potential sale of the club, which calls Langford, British Columbia home. In response, the city of Langford said the club owes it more than CAN$691,000 for the team's use of its training centre, and more than CAN$90,000 in unpaid stadium rental fees and game-related costs. As a result, there are fears Pacific could move to another community.

It's not all doom and gloom as there are genuine reasons to be optimistic about the CPL's future. York United, now rebranded to Inter Toronto, are aiming to boost their academy and upgrade their stadium, while FC Supra will join for the 2026 campaign. The league's new team will play at Stade Boreale just outside of Montreal, the country's second-biggest city. This move is long overdue as it represents the CPL's first club in Quebec, one of Canada's most populous provinces where French and English are spoken in equal measure.

The CPL's deal with TSN, one of the country's two all-sports broadcast channels, is likely to be extended into next year. Currently, TSN airs one game per week, simulcasting OneSoccer's broadcast, and it showed all the matches from the CPL play-off this season, including the CPL final for the first time in the league's history.

With next summer's World Cup also on the horizon, the hope is that the CPL will be able to expand its fanbase and global footprint thanks to the influx of soccer fans and media members from around the world who will visit Canada during the month-long competition.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Sam Salter *(Atletico Ottawa)*
The Canadian forward bagged a league record 19 goals to win the Golden Boot, while also winning the league's MVP and the Players' Player of the Year awards. The final was his last game ahead of a move to Swedish side GAIS.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
David Rodriguez
(Atletico Ottawa)
On loan from Mexican club Atletico San Luis, the former US youth international scored 14 goals in all competitions, including a stunning brace in the CPL final.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Bobby Smyrniotis *(Forge FC)*
The 46-year-old Canadian led Forge to the 2025 CPL Shield as regular season winners with 58 points, the second-highest tally in CPL history. They also went the entire regular season unbeaten at home with nine wins and five draws.

Coach of the Season...Bobby Smyrniotis

Qatar

NEEL SHELAT

Review

Portugal win biggest-ever Under-17 World Cup

Expanded tournament sees Portugal's youngsters triumph in the Middle East

Forty-eight teams came together in Qatar to participate in the biggest-ever edition of the Under-17 World Cup. The expansion was a part of wider changes to the tournament format, most notably involving a shift from being a biennial competition to an annual event.

FIFA's desire to grow their footprint on the global match calendar – be it through the expansion of the senior World Cups or the introduction of expanded new tournaments like the Club World Cup – has been met with a degree of criticism. However, the change in the Under-17 World Cup's schedule received a universally positive response from those involved in youth football. The reason behind that is simple: the biennial format left players born in the odd years at a disadvantage as they were less physically developed and experienced than most of the standout stars. While some discrepancies still remain, the playing field was far more level this time around.

The doubling of the number of participants enabled as many as five nations – Zambia, Uganda, El Salvador, Fiji and Republic of Ireland – to make their tournament debuts. There was some scepticism about whether the talent level mismatch would be too great in certain games, and there were some blowouts. In the group stage, 13 matches ended with a margin of five goals or more, the biggest of which was Morocco's 16-0 thrashing of New Caledonia.

But on the whole, the tournament was competitive. Even New Caledonia produced an upset, holding on for a 0-0 draw with Japan before crashing

Under-17 world champions...Portugal's young stars celebrate with the trophy

Shootout hero... Brazil keeper Joao Pedro

back down to earth against the Moroccans. Other eye-catching results included Venezuela's 3-0 victory over England, North Korea's 1-1 draw with Germany, and debutants Uganda's 1-0 win againt France.

With 32 sides advancing to the knockouts – the top two in each of the 12 groups plus the best eight third-placed teams – none of the favourites missed out. The only major surprise in the round of 32 was defending champions Germany's 1-0 loss to Burkina Faso, although Brazil did need penalties to beat Paraguay.

The standout last-16 fixture was Brazil v France, which went all the way to penalties after the South Americans scored an 89th-minute equaliser. Brazil goalkeeper Joao Pedro kept out the first and last French efforts, taking the four-time champions to their sixth consecutive quarter-final. Elsewhere, Austria's 4-0 win over England attracted some attention, though the scoreline was exacerbated by three late goals after a second-half sending off.

The quarter-finals were all tense affairs. Austria and Italy secured 1-0 wins over Japan and Burkina Faso respectively, while Portugal beat Switzerland 2-0, but the pick of the matches was Morocco v Brazil. Locked at 1-1 deep into second-half stoppage time, Brazilian striker Dell poached his second goal of the match to send his side through.

The change in the Under-17 World Cup's schedule received a universally positive response from those involved in youth football

Those results guaranteed at least one first-time finalist. Austria and Italy kicked off the semi-finals. The former had never got past the group stage in their two previous Under-17 World Cup appearances (in 1997 and 2013), while Italy's only previous semi-final run came all the way back in 1987. The *Azzurrini* had far more possession for most of the game, but a clinical counter-attack before the hour mark put them a goal down. Their push for an equaliser did not yield anything, and by the end they had lost their heads. Two late red cards soured the occasion, while the result was sealed by Johannes Moser scoring his second of the game with a fantastic free-kick.

As it happened, the other semi-final also saw the less successful nation prevail. After a goalless draw, Brazil's luck finally ran out as they wound up on the losing side of a 14-kick penalty shootout, with Portugal triumphing in only their second Under-17 World Cup semi-final.

All the matches up to this point had been played on training pitches in Aspire Park, Qatar's national sports centre. The final, however, was held next door, in the Khalifa International Stadium, in front of tens of thousands of spectators. Portugal were the better-supported, and the players responded to that with a commanding first-half display complete with a lovely team goal finished off by striker Anisio Cabral just after the half-hour mark.

The contest was more even after the break as Portugal took fewer risks, dropping deeper and deeper as the clock ticked past 70 minutes and allowing Austria to grow their attacking threat. Substitute Daniel Frauscher came closest to equalising with just five minutes left, picking up a loose ball on the edge of the penalty area and attempting to slot his finish into the near corner. But the ball agonisingly hit the inside of the post and spun back out. Portugal managed to hold on thereafter, recording a historic victory.

Top scorer... Austria attacker Johannes Moser

Final hero... Anisio Cabral celebrates scoring Portugal's winner

Liberia

STEVE MENARY

The Lone Star... the Liberia national team pose for a group photo

Aiming to thrive after overcoming coaching upheaval

The Liberia national team has faced its fair share of off-field issues over the past couple of years

Liberian football is finally looking forwards after a tumultuous period wracked by changes in coaching personnel.

The Lone Star failed to qualify for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations finals in Morocco but finished strongly in 2026 World Cup qualifying, only missing out on second place in their group on goal difference. That seemed unlikely this time two years ago, when head coach Ansumana Keita left after a run of six consecutive defeats led to death threats from angry supporters.

His replacement was Romanian Mario Marinica, who had led Malawi to the last 16 of the 2021 AFCON in Cameroon and brought in his former assistant, British coach Clwyd Jones.

"The Liberians said in no uncertain terms that we need to get beyond the preliminary stage of the AFCON," Jones, who is based in Southampton, tells *World Soccer*. "On videos, the players looked physically and technically better than Malawi's. The only thing they did [wrong] was lose possession in key areas, but from a technical point of view you can do something with that. At this level in Africa, if you get organised properly you have a good chance of winning, or not losing."

> "There was no funding for training camps, even though as staff we were staying in five-star hotels. That put us on the back foot"
>
> Liberia assistant coach Clwyd Jones

Assistant coach... Clwyd Jones with one of his players

Liberia have players starring overseas, from midfielder Mohammed Sangare in the English fifth tier at Morecambe to captain Oscar Dorley and defender Sampson Dweh, currently playing in the UEFA Champions League and Europa League with Czech sides Slavia Prague and Viktoria Plzen respectively.

"The idea was to select the stardust from the local players but when we got there, there were some preparation issues," adds Jones. "There was no funding for training camps, even though as staff we were staying in five-star hotels. That put us on the back foot.

"We had a strategy of territorial positioning to get into the final third for free-kicks, corners and throws when we know we have position."

Drilling their players with a maxim of zero mistakes, maximum efficiency, Marinica and Jones led the team through AFCON pre-qualifying with a 2-0 aggregate win over Djibouti in March 2024, thanks to goals from Sangare and Dorley.

Three months later there were World Cup qualifiers, with the team looking to bounce back after starting the campaign with two defeats under Keita. Yet, despite securing a creditable draw with Namibia in South Africa and then beating Sao Tome & Principe in Morocco, a half-time bust-up between Marinica and some of his players during the latter sparked more coaching upheaval. Jones returned to the UK due to non-payment of wages and, after a run of three consecutive defeats ended their AFCON qualification hopes, Marinica soon followed. "The atmosphere had got so bad with unpaid bills and other stuff that Mario had to resign," says Jones.

Former Liberia international defender Thomas Kojo, who played professionally in the USA and South Africa, returned as head coach yet again after a number of previous spells in the position. Having resolved his payment issues, Jones went back to his old post and helped Liberia finish their World Cup qualifying campaign strongly, finishing level with runners-up Namibia on 15 points, albeit a distance behind runaway group winners Tunisia.

The coaching team of Kojo and Jones remained in place for November's 2-0 friendly defeat to Guinea, but they have plenty of work ahead of them to whip the team into shape, both on and off the pitch, as Liberia look to thrive in 2026.

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Meteoric rise... Mirassol of Brazil

MIRASSOL'S METEORIC RISE

The last few years have been a whirlwind for Brazilian side Mirassol, who as recently as 2020 were playing in the fourth tier but are now flying high in the top flight.

Tipped by pundits and fans alike as relegation candidates in 2025 (their centenary year), Mirassol exceeded even their own wildest expectations in their debut top-flight campaign by securing a top-four finish and qualifying for next season's Copa Libertadores.

Their rise can be traced back to the sale of Luiz Araujo to Sao Paulo in 2013. By including a 30% sell-on fee as part of the deal, they secured a windfall when the winger departed for Lille four years later and shrewdly reinvested the funds in professionalisation, infrastructural improvements and youth development.

Ironically, in the greatest year of the club's history, the former player who started it all for them also enjoyed his finest moment; Luiz Araujo was part of the Flamengo team that won this year's Copa Libertadores.

Mirassol aren't the only side to have flown up the divisions in recent years. Albanians Elbasani, re-founded after a bankruptcy in 2021, wasted no time in climbing from the fourth division to the first tier, where they topped the standings at the start of December. In China, Chengdu Rongcheng have gone from lower-league football in 2018 to challenging the Shanghai clubs for the Super League and playing in this term's AFC Champions League. And Machida Zelvia capped a fairy-tale rise from Japan's seventh tier 20 years ago by winning their first major trophy, the Emperor's Cup, in November.

BELGIUM'S WORLD CHAMPIONS OF HUMANITY

Belgian club FC Apicoles Tilffois have teamed up with the French brand NOLT to produce a football shirt made from recycled plastic. They plan to use the profit from the sale of the shirts – which each cost €41.30, a reference to their local postcode – to finance the installation of two beehives in their home municipality of Esneux. They are even training one of the players and his partner in beekeeping so that they can look after the hives. In a media release, the club self-deprecatingly wrote: "Bees are the true guardians of biodiversity, which they defend much better than we do our own goal: our men's team recently conceded 28 goals in four matches in the Liege P4 league, the lowest division of Belgian football."

But this is not the only initiative to protect wildlife in football. Bhutanese team Thimphu City, whose owner Hishey Tshering is an avid conservationist, donate $20 for every goal scored to the protection of white-bellied herons, a species of bird that is critically endangered and is reported to number only 60 worldwide – almost half of which are in Bhutan. Meanwhile, the Rhino Cup Champions League is a league operating in rural communities in Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where large numbers of men get killed or arrested for poaching rhinos. Its goal is to provide alternative economic opportunities and discourage poaching.

SUDANESE DUO'S DELAYED RWANDA MOVE

With the armed conflict at home showing no sign of abating and the domestic league reduced to a short summer competition, Sudanese giants Al Hilal and Al Merrikh have opted to join the Rwandan Premier League for the 2025-26 season. But the move has been clouded in confusion: both clubs appeared to relocate before CAF formally approved the switch, which led to their scheduled league fixtures being reclassified as friendlies until the authorities issued the green light. Now that approval is in place, Sudan's two most decorated teams face a punishing fixture backlog, with the rest of the division having already played six or seven games.

After spending last season in Mauritania's top flight – where Al Hilal topped the table but, as guest teams cannot officially claim the title, were named as honorary champions – the pair now join a very small group of clubs to have featured in the top domestic leagues of two foreign countries in addition to their own. The only other example is DPMM, who are owned by the Crown Prince of Brunei and have had two spells in both Singapore and Malaysia, twice becoming champions in the former and returning to the latter this summer.

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Morocco v Comoros
AFCON, December 21
The tournament kicks off with a David v Goliath clash as Morocco face Comoros. The Atlas Lions are hosts and favourites for the tournament, while the Coelacanths are making only their second Africa Cup of Nations finals appearance.

Paris Saint-Germain v Paris FC
Ligue 1, January 4
The first French capital derby since Paris FC's return to Ligue 1 will involve the shortest away trip (excluding stadium shares) in top-flight European football. Only 30 metres separate the Stade Jean Bouin from the Parc des Princes.

Vanuatu United v Bula FC
OFC Professional League, January 17
The first-ever game in the history of the OFC Pro League, Oceania's first professional football competition, will be contested by Vanuatu United and Fiji's Bula FC in New Zealand (read next month's edition of *World Soccer* to find out more).

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group A

Nov 14 – Kosice
Slovakia 1 (Bobcek 90+1)
Northern Ireland 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber (Bobcek 88), Skriniar, Obert; Bero, Lobotka, Rigo (Benes 84), Hancko; Duris (Sauer 69), Strelec (Bozenik 88), Haraslin (Tupta 84).
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – McNair (Magennis 73), Ballard, McConville; Hume (Brown 90+7), Lyons, Saville, Devenny; Bradley, Price; D. Charles (Reid 46, Donley 78).
Sent off: Ballard 90+9.

Nov 14 – Luxembourg City
Luxembourg 0
Germany 2 (Woltemade 49, 69)
Luxembourg: Morris – Jans, Korac, Carlson, Bohnert (M. Martins 46); Olesen (Djabi Embalo 79); O. Thill (Cruz 71), C. Martins (Curci 79), Barreiro, Dardari (S. Thill 88); Sinani.
Germany: Baumann – Baku, Anton, Tah (Thiaw 79), Raum; Gnabry (Schade 66), Pavlovic, Goretzka (F. Nmecha 54); Sane (Lewling 79), Woltemade, Wirtz.

Nov 17 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 1 (Donley 44 pen)
Luxembourg 0
Northern Ireland: Hazard – McConville, McNair, Brown; Bradley (Devlin 46), Lyons (Smyth 52), McDonnell (Magennis 67), Lewis (Kelly 82); Galbraith, Donley (Marshall 67), Price.
Luxembourg: Morris – M. Martins (Dzogovic 87), Korac, Carlson, Jans; Olesen (Cruz 67), Barreiro; O. Thill (Muratovic 80), C. Martins, Dardari (Avdusinovic 67); Sinani.

Nov 17 – Leipzig
Germany 6 (Woltemade 18, Gnabry 29, Sane 36, 41, Baku 67, Ouedraogo 79)
Slovakia 0
Germany: Baumann – Kimmich (Baku 64), Tah, Schlotterbeck (Thiaw 64), Raum (Brown 72); Goretzka, Pavlovic (F. Nmecha 46); Sane, Gnabry, Wirtz (Ouedraogo 77); Woltemade.
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber (Schranz 46), Skriniar, Obert, Hancko; Bero (Rigo 24), Lobotka, Duda (Satka 46); Duris (Pekarik 82), Strelec (Bobcek 67), Sauer.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Germany (Q)	6	5	0	1	16	3	15
Slovakia*	6	4	0	2	6	8	12
N. Ireland**	6	3	0	3	7	6	9
Luxembourg	6	0	0	6	1	13	0

**Advance to second round play-offs*
***Advance to second round play-offs via 2024-25 UEFA Nations League ranking*

Group B

Nov 15 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 0
Kosovo 2 (Asllani 6, Karnicnik 64 og)
Slovenia: Oblak – Brekalo, Bijol, Drkusic; Karnicnik, Gorenc Stankovic (Petrovic 46), Elsnik, Janza (Stojanovic 46); Horvat (Verbic 82); Sporar (Gradisar 66), Vipotnik (Sturm 76).
Sent off: Stojanovic 53.
Kosovo: Saipi – Dellova, Am. Rrahmani, Hajdari; Vojvoda (E. Krasniqi 76), Rexhbecaj (Hodza 65), Avdullahu, Gallepeni; Muriqi (Rashica 89), Muslija (Jashari 89); Asllani (Al. Rrahmani 76).

Nov 15 – Geneva
Switzerland 4 (Embolo 12, Xhaka 60 pen, Ndoye 75, Manzambi 90+4)
Sweden 1 (Nygren 33)
Switzerland: Kobel – Widmer, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Muheim 70); Aebischer, Xhaka; Vargas (Fassnacht 85), Rieder (Sow 70), Ndoye (Zeqiri 90); Embolo (Manzambi 85).
Sweden: Johansson – Holm (Gudmundsson 50), Lagerbielke, Hien, Svensson; Bernhardsson (Lidberg 78), Karlstrom, Ayari (Zeneli 63), Elanga (Forsberg 78); Nygren, Svanberg (Isak 62).

Nov 18 – Pristina
Kosovo 1 (Muslija 74)
Switzerland 1 (Vargas 47)
Kosovo: Muric – Vojvoda, Dellova, Am. Rrahmani (I. Krasniqi 72), Aliti, Gallepeni; Hodza (Zabergja 62), Rexhbecaj, Muslija (Berisha 87); Asllani (Zhegrova 63), Muriqi (Al. Rrahmani 87).
Switzerland: Kobel – Widmer (Schmidt 75), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez; Aebischer, Xhaka (Sohm 76), Sow (Fassnacht 89); Manzambi, Embolo (Zeqiri 69), Vargas (Rieder 69).

Nov 18 – Stockholm
Sweden 1 (Lundgren 87)
Slovenia 1 (Elsnik 64)
Sweden: Widell Zetterstrom – Krafth (Gudmundsson 65), Starfelt, Lindelof (Lagerbielke 84), Svensson; Lundgren, Zeneli, Svanberg (Johansson 66), Sema (Forsberg 38); Bardghji (Bernhardsson 66), Lidberg.
Slovenia: Vekic – Karnicnik, Drkusic, Bijol, Balkovec, Janza; Seslar (Horvat 69), Gnezda Cerin, Elsnik (Petrovic 88), Sturm (Mlakar 89); Sporar (Gorenc Stankovic 90+6).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	2	14
Kosovo*	6	3	2	1	6	5	11
Slovenia	6	0	4	2	3	8	4
Sweden**	6	0	2	4	4	12	2

**Advance to second round play-offs*
***Advance to second round play-offs via 2024-25 UEFA Nations League ranking*

Group C

Nov 15 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Damsgaard 11, Isaksen 79)
Belarus 2 (Gromyko 62, Demchenko 65)
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Christensen, Vestergaard, Dorgu; Isaksen (Dreyer 88), Hojbjerg, Norgaard (Hjulmand 70), Damsgaard (Billing 90+7); Eriksen (Froholdt 70); Wind (Biereth 70).
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Parkhomenko (Khvalko 42), Begunov, Zabelin; Malashevich, Yablonskiy, Ebong, Pechenin; Demchenko (Korzun 69), Gromyko (Kontsevoy 78); Lisakovich (Barkovskiy 69).

Nov 15 – Piraeus
Greece 3 (Bakasetas 7, Karetsas 57, Tzolis 63)
Scotland 2 (Gannon-Doak 65, Christie 70)
Greece: Vlachodimos – Vagiannidis, Retsos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Kourbelis, Mouzakitis (Hatzidiakos 90); Karetsas (Masouras 76), Bakasetas, Tzolis (Kostoulas 90); Pavlidis (Tetteh 43).
Sent off: Bakasetas 84.
Scotland: Gordon – Hickey (Ralston 75), Souttar, Hanley (McKenna 75), Robertson; Christie (Dykes 82), Ferguson; Gannon-Doak (Hirst 88), McTominay, McGinn; Adams (Shankland 82).

Nov 18 – Zalaegerszeg
Belarus 0
Greece 0
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Khvalko (Kalinin 67), Begunov, Zabelin; Malashevich (Melnichenko 46), Yablonskiy, Ebong, Malkevich; Gromyko (Kontsevoy 68), Demchenko; Lisakovich (Barkovskiy 78).
Greece: Vlachodimos – Rota, Retsos, Hatzidiakos, Tsimikas; Zafeiris, Siopsis (Triantis 64); Masouras (Karetsas 69), Mantalos (Kourbelis 83), Tzolis; Tetteh (Kostoulas 64).

Nov 18 – Glasgow
Scotland 4 (McTominay 3, Shankland 78, Tierney 90+3, McLean 90+8)
Denmark 2 (Hojlund 57 pen, Dorgu 81)
Scotland: Gordon – Hickey (Tierney 72), Hanley, McKenna, Robertson; Ferguson; Gannon-Doak (McLean 21), Christie (Shankland 64), McTominay, McGinn; Dykes (Adams 64).
Denmark: Schmeichel – Kristensen, Andersen, Christensen, Dorgu; Hjulmand, Hojbjerg; Isaksen (Biereth 90), Froholdt, Damsgaard (Vestergaard 64); Hojlund (Norgaard 84).
Sent off: Kristensen 61.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Scotland (Q)	6	4	1	1	13	7	13
Denmark*	6	3	2	1	16	7	11
Greece	6	2	1	3	10	12	7
Belarus	6	0	2	4	4	17	2

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group D

Nov 13 – Baku
Azerbaijan 0
Iceland 2 (A. Gudmundsson 20, Ingason 39)
Azerbaijan: A. Bayramov – Badalov, Mustafazada, Krivotsyuk; A. Huseynov, Mahmudov (Akhmedzade 60), Xaybulayev (A. Nuriyev 84), Abbasov; T. Bayramov (C. Nuriyev 60), X. Aliyev (Abdullazade 72); Akhundzada (Dadashov 72).
Iceland: Olafsson – Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson, Ellertsson; Johanesson (S. Thordarson 90), Haraldsson; J. Gudmundsson (Thorsteinsson 68), A. Gudmundsson (G. Thordarson 90+1), Hlynsson (D. Gudjohnsen 68); A. Gudjohnsen (Willumsson 68).

Nov 13 – Paris
France 4 (Mbappe 55 pen, 83, Olise 76, Ekitike 88)
Ukraine 0
France: Maignan – Kounde (Gusto 89), Saliba, Upamecano, Digne; Kante, Kone (Zaire-Emery 80); Olise (Nkunku 89), Cherki (Akliouche 68), Barcola (Ekitike 67); Mbappe.
Ukraine: Trubin – Karavayev, Zabarnyi, Svatok, Mykhavko (Zubkov 75), Mykhaylichenko; Ocheretko (Shaparenko 64), Yarmoliuk (Voloshyn 85), Nazaryna; Hutsuliak (Vanat 64), Yaremchuk (Tsyhankov 75).

Nov 16 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Dadashov 4)
France 3 (Mateta 17, Akliouche 30, Mahammadaliyev 45 og)
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev (A. Bayramov 46) – Badalov, Mustafazada, Krivotsyuk; Q. Aliyev, Mahmudov (Abdullazade 66), Xaybulayev, Dasdamirov; C. Nuriyev (Akhundzada 46), Dadashov (A. Huseynov 75), X. Aliyev (Akhmedzade 87).
France: Chevalier – Gusto, Konate, L. Hernandez, T. Hernandez; Zaire-Emery, Thuram; Akliouche (Thauvin 62), Nkunku (Cherki 62), Ekitike; Mateta (Barcola 79).

Nov 16 – Warsaw
Ukraine 2 (Zubkov 83, Hutsuliak 90+3)
Iceland 0
Ukraine: Trubin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Kaliuzhnyi; Tsyhankov (Nazaryna 87), Malinovskyi (Hutsuliak 77), Yarmoliuk (Shaparenko 69), Zubkov (Svatok 87); Vanat (Yaremchuk 69).
Iceland: Olafsson – Palsson, Ingason, Magnusson, Ellertsson (Tomasson 86); Thorsteinsson (D. Gudjohnsen 86), Haraldsson, Johanesson, A. Gudmundsson; Willumsson (J. Gudmundsson 65), A. Gudjohnsen.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France (Q)	6	5	1	0	16	4	16
Ukraine*	6	3	1	2	10	11	10
Iceland	6	2	1	3	13	11	7
Azerbaijan	6	0	1	5	3	16	1

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group E

Nov 15 – Bursa
Turkey 2 (Calhanoglu 18 pen, Chernev 83 og)
Bulgaria 0
Turkey: Cakir – Celik (Ayhan 61, Karazor 81), Demiral (Akaydin 46), Bardakci, Kadioglu (Muldur 71); Calhanoglu, Yuksek; Aydin, Guler (Sari 88), Yildiz; Akturkoglu.
Bulgaria: Mitov – Georgiev, K. Dimitrov (M. Petkov 72), Chernev, H. Petrov; Rusev (Nikolov 85), Gruev, A. Kraev (Chochev 72), Krastev, Z. Dimitrov; Despodov (Minchev 64).

Nov 15 – Tbilisi
Georgia 0
Spain 4 (Oyarzabal 11 pen, 63, Zubimendi 22, F. Torres 34)
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Mamuchashvili, Goglichidze (Kashia 46), Lochoshvili, Gocholeishvili; Mekvabishvili (Tsitaishvili 71); Tabatadze (Kvernadze 57), Davitashvili (Abuashvili 85), Kiteishvili, Kvaratskhelia; Zivzivadze (Kvilitaia 71).
Spain: Simon – Porro (Llorente 46), Cubarsi, Laporte, Cucurella; Merino (Fermin 62), Zubimendi, Fabian (Barrios 62); F. Torres (Yeremy 80), Oyarzabal (Iglesias 71), Baena.

Nov 18 – Sofia
Bulgaria 2 (Rusev 10, Krastev 24)
Georgia 1 (Lochoshvili 88)
Bulgaria: Mitov – Georgiev, K. Dimitrov, Velkov, H. Petrov; Rusev (Minchev 76), Stoyanov (Shopov 76), Gruev, Krastev (Chochev 89), Z. Dimitrov (Nikolov 60); Despodov (M. Petkov 60).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Gocholeishvili, Kashia, Lochoshvili, Tsitaishvili; Mekvabishvili (Kvilitaia 31), Kochorashvili, Kiteishvili (Abuashvili 86); Davitashvili (Guliashvili 76), Zivzivadze, Kvaratskhelia.

Nov 18 – Seville
Spain 2 (Olmo 4, Oyarzabal 62)
Turkey 2 (Gul 42, Ozcan 54)
Spain: Simon – Llorente, Cubarsi, Laporte, Cucurella; Merino (F. Torres 46), Garcia, Fabian (Fornals 83); Yeremy (Baena 62), Oyarzabal (Aghehowa 62), Olmo (Fermin 74).
Turkey: Bayindir – Celik, Akaydin, Demiral (Akcicek 83), Soyuncu, Kadioglu (Eskihellac 78); Kahveci (Sari 69), Ozcan (Karazor 78), Kokcu, Alper Yilmaz; Gul (Muldur 69).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain (Q)	6	5	1	0	21	2	16
Turkey*	6	4	1	1	17	12	13
Georgia	6	1	0	5	7	15	3
Bulgaria	6	1	0	5	3	19	3

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group F

Nov 13 – Yerevan
Armenia 0
Hungary 1 (Varga 33)
Armenia: Avagyan – Piloyan, S. Muradyan, Mrktchyan, Tiknizyan; Hovhannisyan (Nalbandyan 76), K. Muradyan (Aghasaryan 90), Spertsyan; Sevikyan (Eloyan 76), Ranos (Serobyan 76), Shaghoyan (N. Grigoryan 70).
Hungary: Dibusz – Nego, Orban, Szalai, Kerkez (Z. Nagy 86); Schafer, Styles (Vitalis 71), Szoboszlai; Bolla (Lukacs 61), Varga, Sallai (A. Toth 71).

Nov 13 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Parrott 17, 45)
Portugal 0
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Brien, Collins, O'Shea; Coleman, Cullen, Taylor (Coventry 68), Scales (Dunne 86); Ogbene (Johnston 86), Azaz (Ebosele 79); Parrott (Idah 68).
Portugal: Costa – Cancelo (Semedo 46), Dias, Inacio (Veiga 46), Dalot; J. Neves (Ramos 78), R. Neves, Vitinha; B. Silva (Trincao 63), Ronaldo, Felix (Leao 63).
Sent off: Ronaldo 61.

Nov 16 – Budapest
Hungary 2 (Lukacs 3, Varga 37)
Rep of Ireland 3 (Parrott 15 pen, 80, 90+6)
Hungary: Dibusz – Nego (Mocsi 90+3), Orban, Szalai, Kerkez; Schafer (Otvos 63), Szoboszlai; Sallai (Redzic 90+3), A. Toth (Bolla 76), Lukacs (Styles 63); Varga.
Rep of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Brien (Manning 46), Collins, O'Shea; Coleman (Ebosele 60), Cullen (Taylor 80), Molumby (Kenny 60), Scales; Ogbene (Idah 53), Azaz; Parrott.

Nov 16 – Porto
Portugal 9 (Veiga 7, Ramos 28, J. Neves 30, 41, 81, Fernandes 45+3 pen, 51, 72, Conceicao 90+2)
Armenia 1 (Spertsyan 18)
Portugal: Costa – Semedo, Dias (R. Neves 73), Veiga, Cancelo (Nunes 73); J. Neves, Vitinha

(Felix 67); B. Silva (Forbs 56), Fernandes, Leao (Conceicao 56); Ramos.
Armenia: Avagyan – Piloyan (Harutyunyan 55), S. Muradyan, Mrktchyan, Tiknizyan; Hovhannisyan, K. Muradyan (Bandikyan 82), Aghasaryan (Sevikyan 46); Serobyan (Shaghoyan 46), Ranos (Eloyan 65), Spertsyan.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal (Q)	6	4	1	1	20	7	13
Rep of Ireland*	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
Hungary	6	2	2	2	11	10	8
Armenia	6	1	0	5	3	19	3

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group G

Nov 14 – Helsinki
Finland 0
Malta 1 (Grech 81)
Finland: Sinisalo – Mahuta (Jukkola 73), Koski, Tenho, Lahteenmaki; Kairinen; Kallman (Pukki 78), Markhiev (Skytta 73), Walta, Antman (Keskinen 78); Pohjanpalo (Lod 61).
Malta: Bonello – Muscat (Mentz 79), Shaw, Pepe (Borg 88), Corbalan; Satariano, Guillaumier; J. Mbong (Magri Overend 65), P. Mbong (Grech 79), Chouaref; Cardona (Zammit 88).

Nov 14 – Warsaw
Poland 1 (Kaminski 43)
Netherlands 1 (Memphis 47)
Poland: Grabara – Ziolkowski, Kedziora, Kiwior; Cash (Wszolek 81), S. Szymanski (Kapustka 13), Zielinski, Skoras; Kaminski (Rozga 90+2), Zalewski (Grosicki 82); Lewandowski (Buksa 90+2).
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Geertruida (Van Hecke 74), J. Timber, Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Gravenberch (Schouten 89), De Jong; Malen, Kluivert (Reijnders 74), Gakpo; Memphis (Emegha 89).

Nov 17 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 4 (Reijnders 16, Gakpo 58 pen, Simons 60, Malen 62)
Lithuania 0
Netherlands: Verbruggen – J. Timber (Geertruida 64), De Ligt, Van Dijk, Ake; Reijnders, De Jong (Q. Timber 64), Simons (Valente 78); Malen, Memphis (Emegha 63), Gakpo (Lang 79).
Lithuania: Gertmonas – Sirvys (Beneta 46), Armalas, Utkus, Tutyskinas, Lasickas (Upstas 84); Sirgedas (Golubickas 46), Vorobjovas, Gineitis, Kalinuaskas (Burba 81); Cernych (Paulauskas 59).

Nov 17 – Ta'Qali
Malta 2 (Cardona 36, Teuma 68 pen)
Poland 3 (Lewandowski 32, Wszolek 59, Zielinski 85)
Malta: Bonello – Muscat (Corbalan 54), Shaw, Mentz (Buhagiar 87), Camenzuli; Guillaumier, Satariano; J. Mbong (Magri Overend 46), Teuma (Pepe 77), Chouaref; Cardona (P. Mbong 77).
Poland: Dragowski – Wszolek (Grosicki 78), Wisniewski (Bereszynski 78), Kedziora, Kiwior, Skoras; Kaminski (Rozga 90+2), Slisz (Kapustka 78), Zielinski, Zalewski (Swiderski 46); Lewandowski.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Netherlands (Q)	8	6	2	0	27	4	20
Poland*	8	5	2	1	14	7	17
Finland	8	3	1	4	8	14	10
Malta	8	1	2	5	4	19	5
Lithuania	8	0	3	5	6	15	3

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group H

Nov 15 – Limassol
Cyprus 0
Austria 2 (Arnautovic 18 pen, 55)
Cyprus: Fabiano – Shikkis, Shielis, Panagiotou, Anderson Correia (Kosti 65); Kousoulos; Loizou (Kakoullis 65), Charalampous (Koutsakos 82), Kastanos (Andreou 65), Tzionis (Foti 88); Sotiriou.
Austria: A. Schlager – Posch, Lienhart, Danso, Laimer; Seiwald, X. Schlager (Wimmer 61); Schmid (Wurmbrand 90), Baumgartner (Friedl 85), Sabitzer (Grull 90); Arnautovic (Gregoritsch 61).

Nov 15 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 3 (Dzeko 49, Bajraktarevic 79, Tabakovic 90+3)
Romania 1 (Birligea 17)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Malic (Alajbegovic 46), Katic, Muharemovic, Dedic; Burnic (Basic 70), Tahirovic (Hadziahmetovic 83); Bajraktarevic, Bazdar (Tabakovic 46), Memic; Dzeko (Gigovic 90).
Romania: Radu – Ratiu, Racovitan, Ghita, Chipciu; Hagi (Miculescu 75), M. Marin, Dragomir (R. Marin 75); Man (Tanase 90+3), Birligea (Dragus 65), Mihaila.
Sent off: Dragus 67.

Nov 18 – Vienna
Austria 1 (Gregoritsch 77)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Tabakovic 12)
Austria: A. Schlager – Laimer, Lienhart, Danso, Mwene (Posch 69); Seiwald, X. Schlager (Schmid 68); Wimmer (Gregoritsch 59), Baumgartner, Sabitzer; Arnautovic (Schopf 82).
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Malic (Bazdar 84), Hadzikadunic, Muharemovic, Karic (Mujakic 71); Bajraktarevic, Sunjic (Alajbegovic 84), Tahirovic (Hadziahmetovic 84), Memic; Tabakovic (Gigovic 63), Dzeko.

Nov 18 – Ploiesti
Romania 7 (Rossi 13 og, Baiaram 29, Man 42, Valentini 57 og, Hagi 76, Ratiu 82, Munteanu 86 pen)
San Marino 1 (Giacopetti 2)
Romania: Tarnovanu – Ratiu, Ghita, Eissat, Bancu; Dragomir (Olaru 46), Screciu (R. Marin 46), Tanase (Hagi 63); Man (Petrila 75), Birligea (Munteanu 63), Baiaram.
San Marino: Colombo – Fabbri (Tosi 63), Valentini, Rossi (G. Benvenuti 46), Riccardi; Pancotti (Capicchioni 87), A. Golinucci, Casadei, Mularoni, Zannoni; Giacopetti (Vitaioli 75).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria (Q)	8	6	1	1	22	4	19
Bosnia & Herz*	8	5	2	1	17	7	17
Romania**	8	4	1	3	19	10	13
Cyprus	8	2	2	4	11	11	8
San Marino	8	0	0	8	2	39	0

**Advance to second round play-offs*
***Advance to second round play-offs via 2024-25 UEFA Nations League ranking*

Group I

Nov 13 – Oslo
Norway 4 (Sorloth 50, 52, Haaland 56, 62)
Estonia 1 (Saarma 64)
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Moller Wolfe (Bjorkan 86); Bobb (Schjelderup 69), Berge, Berg (Thorsby 74), Nusa (Donnum 86); Sorloth (Thorstvedt 74), Haaland.
Estonia: Hein – Schjonning-Larsen, Peetson, Kuusk, Mets, Sinyanskiy; Saarma (Miller 69), Palumets (Poom 83), Soomets (Vetkal 75), Shein (Kristal 83); Sappinen (Paalberg 83).

Nov 13 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Italy 2 (Mancini 88, Esposito 90+2)
Moldova: Kozhukhar – Revenco, Stefan, Craciun, Dumbravanu, Reabciuk (Bitca 55); Perciun (Bogaciuc 61), Rata (Bodisteanu 75), Ionita; Nicolaescu (Fratea 75), Postolachi (Damascan 56).
Italy: Vicario – Bellanova, Mancini, Buongiorno, Cambiaso (Dimarco 75); Tonali, Cristante; Orsolini (Politano 75), Raspadori (Esposito 65), Zaccagni (Frattesi 82); Scamacca (Retegui 65).

Nov 16 – Chisinau
Israel 4 (Turgeman 21 pen, Revivo 65, E. Peretz 85, Baboglo 88 og)
Moldova 1 (Nicolaescu 37)
Israel: Glazer – Dasa (Mizrahi 46), Blorian, Lemkin, Revivo; Kanichowsky (Turiel 78), E. Peretz; Biton (Shua 86), Dor Peretz (Jaber 78), Gloukh; Turgeman (Toklomati 84).
Moldova: Timbur – Cucos, Baboglo, Gherasimencov; Forov (Raileanu 55), Fratea (Bodisteanu 72), Caimacov, Perciun, Bitca (Bors 55); Postolachi (Platica 54); Nicolaescu (Ionita 66).
Sent off: Perciun 18.

Nov 16 – Milan
Italy 1 (Esposito 11)
Norway 4 (Nusa 63, Haaland 78, 79, Strand Larsen 90+3)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Mancini, Bastoni (Ricci 86); Politano, Frattesi (Cristante 68), Locatelli (Scamacca 79), Barella (Buongiorno 86), Dimarco; Retegui, Esposito (Zaccagni 79).
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Moller Wolfe (Ostigard 89); Sorloth (Bobb 76), Berg (Thorsby 64), Berge, Thorstvedt (Aasgaard 75), Nusa; Haaland (Strand Larsen 89).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway (Q)	8	8	0	0	37	5	24
Italy*	8	6	0	2	21	12	18
Israel	8	4	0	4	19	20	12
Estonia	8	1	1	6	8	21	4
Moldova	8	0	1	7	5	32	1

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group J

Nov 15 – Astana
Kazakhstan 1 (Satpayev 9)
Belgium 1 (Vanaken 48)
Kazakhstan: Anarbekov – Kairov, Kasym, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Orazov (Kasabulat 90+1), Tapalov (Zhukov 90+2); Chesnokov, Samorodov (Karaman 80), Kenzhebek (Ashirbek 57); Satpayev (Sviridov 56).
Sent off: Chesnokov 79.
Belgium: Sels – Castagne, De Winter, Theate, Seys (De Cuyper 81); Raskin (Vermant 89), Onana (Tielemans 71); Doku, Vanaken, Trossard (Saelemaekers 71); De Ketelaere (Openda 71).

Nov 15 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Wales 1 (J. James 61)
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Meier, Malin, Goppel; N. Hasler, Luchinger, A. Hasler (S. Wolfinger 81), Sele (Schlegel 81), Zund (Weissenhofer 66); Luque-Notaro (Pizzi 74), Salanovic (Saglam 46).
Wales: Darlow – Williams, Lawlor, Rodon, Dasilva; Ampadu; D. James (Brooks 66), Broadhead (R. Colwill 65), J. James (Cullen 77), Thomas (Johnson 83); Harris (Koumas 66).

Nov 18 – Liege
Belgium 7 (Vanaken 3, Doku 34, 41, Mechele 52, Saelemaekers 55, De Ketelaere 57, 59)
Liechtenstein 0
Belgium: Lammens – Meunier, Mechele, Theate, Castagne; Tielemans (Witsel 60), Raskin, Vanaken (Moreira 75); Saelemaekers (Trossard 60), De Ketelaere (Openda 60), Doku (Lukebakio 71).
Liechtenstein: Buchel – S. Wolfinger, Meier, Malin, Hofer, Goppel (Zund 18); Luchinger (A. Hasler 48), N. Hasler (Schlegel 72), Sele; Luque-Notaro (Weissenhofer 72), Kindle (Pizzi 46).

Nov 18 – Cardiff
Wales 7 (Wilson 18 pen, 75, 81 pen, Brooks 21, Johnson 37, D. James 57, Broadhead 88)
North Macedonia 1 (Miovski 23)
Wales: Darlow – Williams (Kpakio 82), Rodon (Mepham 82), Lawlor, Dasilva; Sheehan; D. James (Thomas 64), Brooks (Broadhead 64), Cullen (I. Davies 85), Johnson; Wilson.
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ilievski, Zajkov, Velkovski, Stojchevski (Qamili 55), Ashkovski (Serafimov 82); Alimi (Atanasov 64), Bardhi, Kostadinov (Churlinov 55); Miovski (Rastoder 64), Elmas.

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgium (Q)	8	5	3	0	29	7	18
Wales*	8	5	1	2	21	11	16
N. Macedonia**	8	3	4	1	13	10	13
Kazakhstan	8	2	2	4	9	13	8
Liechtenstein	8	0	0	8	0	31	0

**Advance to second round play-offs*
***Advance to second round play-offs via 2024-25 UEFA Nations League ranking*

Group K

Nov 13 – Encamp
Andorra 0
Albania 1 (Asllani 67)
Andorra: Ruiz – Borra, Llovera, Olivera, San Nicolas (Remolins 86); Rodrigo, Izquierdo (Teixeira 69), Babot (Ferreira 86), Cervos; Lopez (Moreno 86), Berto (Cucu 69).
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj, Ajeti, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Shehu, Asllani; Broja (Uzuni 59), Laci (Bajrami 60), Hoxha; Manaj (Tuci 77).

Nov 13 – Wembley
England 2 (Saka 28, Eze 90)
Serbia 0
England: Pickford – James, Konsa, Stones, O'Reilly; Rice (J. Henderson 65), Anderson (Wharton 85); Saka, Rogers (Bellingham 65), Rashford (Eze 64); Kane (Foden 65).
Serbia: Rajkovic – Mimovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic, Terzic (Radonjic 77); Gudelj (Samardzic 69), Lukic (Grujic 76); Zivkovic (Jovic 77), I. Ilic (Stankovic 39), Kostic; Vlahovic.

Nov 16 – Leskovac
Serbia 2 (Katai 49, Stankovic 60)
Latvia 1 (Gutkovskis 12)
Serbia: Rajkovic – Erakovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic (Mimovic 46), Kostic; Grujic (Gudelj 85), Lukic (Stankovic 46); Zivkovic, Samardzic, Radonjic (Katai 46); Jovic (Milosevic 80).
Latvia: Matrevics – Savalnieks, Veips, Melniks, Jurkovskis, Tonisevs (Jagodinskis 78); Ikaunieks (Saveljevs 65), Vapne (Pulis 83), Zelenkovs, Daskevics (Penkevics 78); Gutkovskis (Regza 65).

Nov 16 – Tirana
Albania 0
England 2 (Kane 74, 82)
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj (Balliu 26), Ismajli, Djimsiti, Aliji; Ramadani, Asllani; Bajrami (Broja 75), Laci (Pajaziti 84), Hoxha; Uzuni.
England: D. Henderson – Quansah, Stones, Burn, O'Reilly; Bellingham (Rogers 84), Wharton (Anderson 75), Rice (Foden 62); Bowen (Rashford 75), Kane, Eze (Saka 62).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England (Q)	8	8	0	0	22	0	24
Albania*	8	4	2	2	7	5	14
Serbia	8	4	1	3	9	10	13
Latvia	8	1	2	5	5	15	5
Andorra	8	0	1	7	3	16	1

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Group L

Nov 14 – Rijeka
Croatia 3 (Gvardiol 23, Musa 57, Vlasic 70)
Faroe Islands 1 (Turi 16)
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Vuskovic, Gvardiol; Marco Pasalic (Fruk 62), Modric (Vlasic 62), Mario Pasalic (Sutalo 46), Perisic (Orsic 71); P. Sucic, Kramaric; Musa (Matanovic 74).
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Joensen, Faero, G. Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Davidsen (Klettskard 85); Fredriksberg (Justinussen 77), Turi (Bjartalid 69), Andreasen, Sorensen (Agnarsson 77); Olsen (Knudsen 68).

Nov 14 – Gibraltar
Gibraltar 1 (Jessop 20)
Montenegro 2 (Adzic 33, Krstovic 42 pen)
Gibraltar: Hankins – Jolley, Ronan (Bartolo 81), Lopes, Annesley (Olivero 74), Mauro; Jessop (Richards 57), Torrilla (Bent 56), Pozo, Scanlon; Borge (Morgan 58).
Montenegro: Nikic – Marusic, Tuci, Sipcic (Rubezic 77), Radunovic (Perovic 46); Jankovic (Brnovic 74), Adzic (Loncar 66), Bulatovic, Vukotic; Osmajic, Krstovic (Dukanovic 74).

Nov 17 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Osmajic 3, Krstovic 17)
Croatia 3 (Perisic 37 pen, Jakic 72, Vlasic 87)
Montenegro: Nikic – Vesovic (Sipcic 78), Tuci, Rubezic (Perovic 46), Marusic; Jankovic, Bulatovic (Brnovic 77), Loncar (Adzic 62); Jovetic (Vukotic 62); Osmajic, Krstovic.
Croatia: Livakovic – Jakic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car (Pongracic 46), Gvardiol (Stanisic 46); Mario Pasalic, Moro; Ivanovic (Kramaric 55), Vlasic, Perisic (Modric 78); Matanovic (Musa 59).

Nov 17 – Olomouc
Czech Republic 6 (Doudera 5, Chory 18, Coufal 32, Karabec 39, Soucek 44, Hranac 51)
Gibraltar 0
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Hranac, Zeleny (Chaloupek 68), Jurasek; Beran (Cerv 58), Soucek (Sadilek 68); Doudera, Schick (Chytil 88), Karabec; Chory (Danek 57).
Gibraltar: Hankins – Jolley, Ronan, Lopes, Olivero (McClafferty 46), Mauro; Del Rio (Vinet 76), Pozo (Bent 69), Torrilla (Perera 85), Scanlon; Bartolo (Morgan 85).

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Croatia (Q)	8	7	1	0	26	4	22
Czech Rep*	8	5	1	2	18	8	16
Faroe Islands	8	4	0	4	11	9	12
Montenegro	8	3	0	5	8	17	9
Gibraltar	8	0	0	8	3	28	0

**Advance to second round play-offs*

Second Round Play-Offs Draw

Path A

Mar 26: Italy v Northern Ireland; Wales v Bosnia & Herzegovina

• *Final to take place on March 31 with winners of Wales-Bosnia & Herzegovina tie to host*

Path B

Mar 26: Ukraine v Sweden; Poland v Albania

• *Final to take place on March 31 with winners of Ukraine-Sweden tie to host (if Ukraine progress the final will be played at a neutral venue)*

Path C

Mar 26: Turkey v Romania; Slovakia v Kosovo

• *Final to take place on March 31 with winners of Slovakia-Kosovo tie to host*

Path D

Mar 26: Denmark v North Macedonia; Czech Republic v Republic of Ireland

• *Final to take place on March 31 with winners of Czech Republic-Republic of Ireland tie to host*

Four path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Already qualified

Egypt, Senegal, South Africa, Cape Verde, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Algeria, Tunisia and Ghana *(first round group stage winners)*

Second Round

Semi-Finals

Nov 13 – Rabat
Cameroon 0
DR Congo 1 (Mbemba 90+1)
Cameroon: Onana – Castelletto, Ngadeu-Ngadjui, Nouhou; Tchatchoua, Avom (Nkoudou 73), Baleba (Hongla 46), Nagida (Bassogog 73); Mbeumo, Etta Eyong (Ngamaleu 90+4); Magri (Aboubakar 46).
DR Congo: Mpasi – Wan-Bissaka, Tuanzebe, Moutoussamy, Mbemba, J. Kayembe; Sadiki (Mukau 89), Pickel (E. Kayembe 59), Mbuku (Cipenga 75); Bongonda, Bakambu (Mayele 75).

Nov 13 – Rabat
Nigeria 4 (Adams 78, Ejuke 97, Osimhen 102, 110)
Gabon 1 (M. Lemina 89)
After Extra-Time
Nigeria: Nwabali – Osayi-Samuel (Troost-Ekong 109), Fredrick, Bassey, Zaidu; Ndidi; Chukwueze (Ejuke 60), Lookman (Simon 60), Iwobi; Adams (Onyeka 83), Osimhen (Arokodare 116).
Gabon: Mbaba – A. Oyono, Appindangoye, Ecule Manga, Ekomie; Poko (N. Lemina 76, J. Oyono 100), Ndong (Nze 84); Openda (Meyo 76, Moucketou-Moussounda 100), M. Lemina, Bouanga; Aubameyang.

Final

Nov 16 – Rabat
Nigeria 1 (Onyeka 3)
DR Congo 1 (Elia 32)
After Extra-Time; DR Congo win 4-3 on pens
Nigeria: Nwabali – Fredrick, Ajayi, Bassey, Zaidu (Onyemaechi 96); Onyeka, Ndidi, Iwobi (Arokodare 77, Awaziem 115); Lookman (Ejuke 57), Osimhen (Adams 46), Chukwueze (Simon 57).
DR Congo: Mpasi (Fayulu 120) – Wan-Bissaka, Tuanzebe, Mbemba, Masuaku; Mukau (E. Kayembe 71), Moutoussamy, Sadiki; Elia (Cipenga 71), Mbuku (Balikwisha 105), Bakambu (Mayele 59).

• *Democratic Republic of the Congo advance to inter-confederation play-offs*

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

Already qualified

United States, Mexico and Canada *(co-hosts)*

Third Round

Group A

Nov 13 – Paramaribo
Suriname 4 (Chery 44 pen, Margaret 74, 76, Klas 83)
El Salvador 0

Nov 13 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 2 (Ordonez 69, Munoz 72)
Panama 3 (Waterman 30, 44, Fajardo 78)

Nov 18 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 3 (Lom 49, Escobar 57, Santis 65)
Suriname 1 (Samayoa 90+3 og)

Nov 18 – Panama City
Panama 3 (Blackman 17, Davis 45+4 pen, Rodriguez 85)
El Salvador 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panama (Q)	6	3	3	0	9	4	12
Suriname*	6	2	3	1	9	6	9
Guatemala	6	2	2	2	8	7	8
El Salvador	6	1	0	5	2	11	3

**Advance to inter-confederation play-offs*

Group B

Nov 13 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 0
Curacao 7 (L. Bacuna 6 pen, J. Bacuna 32, Paulina 48 pen, 63, Hansen 59, Martha 82, Van Eijma 90+2)

Nov 13 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Molino 85)
Jamaica 1 (Cephas 53)

Nov 18 – Kingston
Jamaica 0
Curacao 0

Nov 18 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (Henry 9, James 66)
Bermuda 2 (Tucker 60, Parfitt 65)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Curacao (Q)	6	3	3	0	13	3	12
Jamaica*	6	3	2	1	11	3	11
Trinidad & Tob	6	1	4	1	7	6	7
Bermuda	6	0	1	5	4	23	1

**Advance to inter-confederation play-offs*

Group C

Nov 13 – Willemstad
Haiti 1 (Pierrot 44)
Costa Rica 0

Nov 13 – Managua
Nicaragua 2 (Hernandez 12, Moreno 82)
Honduras 0

Nov 18 – San Jose
Costa Rica 0
Honduras 0

Nov 18 – Willemstad
Haiti 2 (Louicius 9, Providence 45+1)
Nicaragua 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Haiti (Q)	6	3	2	1	9	6	11
Honduras	6	2	3	1	5	2	9
Costa Rica	6	1	4	1	8	6	7
Nicaragua	6	1	1	4	4	12	4

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Already qualified

Iran, Uzbekistan, South Korea, Jordan, Japan and Australia *(third round group stage winners/runners-up)*, Qatar and Saudi Arabia *(fourth round group stage winners)*

Fifth Round

Play-Off – 1st Leg

Nov 13 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 1 (Luanzinho 18)
Iraq 1 (Al Hamadi 10)
United Arab Emirates: Eisa – Meloni (Rabii 85), Pimenta, Zhir, R. Canedo; Luanzinho (Saleh 64), Nader, Ramadan (Bruno 64), Adil (Caio Canedo 89); Gimenez; Abdalla (Caio Lucas 46).
Iraq: Hassan – H. Ali, Hashim, Tahseen, Doski; Sher (Iqbal 79), Jasim (Abdulkareem 72), Al Ammari, Farji (Yahya 90+4); Al Hamadi (Hussein 46), M. Ali (Karim 79).

Play-Off – 2nd Leg

Nov 18 – Basra
Iraq 2 (M. Ali 66, Al Ammari 90+17 pen)
United Arab Emirates 1 (Caio Lucas 52)
Iraq: Hassan – H. Ali (Saadoon 78), Tahseen, Hashim, Doski; Farji, Sher (Iqbal 56), Al Ammari, Jasim; Hussein (Muhsin 90+5), Karim (M. Ali 56).
United Arab Emirates: Eisa – Zhir, Pimenta, Autonne, R. Canedo; Bruno (Adil 75), Meloni, Nader, Luanzinho (Saleh 59); Gimenez (Ramadan 87); Caio Lucas.

• *Iraq advance to inter-confederation play-offs*

INTER-CONFEDERATION stage

● *2 slots available*

Play-Offs Draw

Path 1

Mar 26: New Caledonia v Jamaica
Mar 31: DR Congo v semi-final winners

• *Play-offs to take place in Zapopan, Mexico*

Path 2

Mar 26: Bolivia v Suriname
Mar 31: Iraq v semi-final winners

• *Play-offs to take place in Guadalupe, Mexico*

Two path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFYING

Group A

Nov 18 – Darwin
Timor-Leste 0
Tajikistan 5 (Mabatshoyev 22, 43, Panjshanbe 25, Rakhimov 82, Boboev 86)

Nov 18 – Male
Maldives 0
Philippines 2 (J. Tabinas 24, Reyes 37)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tajikistan	5	4	1	0	13	2	13
Philippines	5	4	1	0	15	5	13
Timor-Leste	5	1	0	4	3	13	3
Maldives	5	0	0	5	1	12	0

Group B

Nov 18 – Bandar Seri Begawan
Brunei 0
Lebanon 3 (Fakhro 3, Merheg 45+3, Bugiel 59)

Nov 18 – Farwaniya
Yemen 7 (Al Zubaidi 16, Al Gahwashi 21, 58, 85, 89, Qasem 76, Al Golan 82)
Bhutan 1 (Wangchuk 83)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon	5	4	1	0	14	0	13
Yemen	5	3	2	0	18	1	11
Brunei	5	1	0	4	2	17	3
Bhutan	5	0	1	4	2	18	1

Group C

Nov 18 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 1 (Orr 15)
Singapore 2 (Shawal 64, Ilhan 68)

Nov 18 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 1 (Morsalin 11)
India 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Singapore	5	3	2	0	7	4	11
Hong Kong	5	2	2	1	7	6	8
Bangladesh	5	1	2	2	6	7	5
India	5	0	2	3	2	5	2

Group D

Nov 18 – Colombo
Sri Lanka 0
Thailand 4 (Thanawat 7, Soonsup-Bell 65, 90, Pansa 77)

Nov 18 – Arkadag
Turkmenistan 3 (Myratberdiyew 13, Tagayew 53, Diniyew 78)
Chinese Taipei 1 (Kouame 45+2)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkmenistan	5	4	0	1	10	5	12
Thailand	5	4	0	1	14	4	12
Sri Lanka	5	2	0	3	5	8	6
Chinese Taipei	5	0	0	5	4	16	0

Group E

Nov 18 – Islamabad
Pakistan 0
Syria 5 (Al Hallaq 34, 47, Samia 79, 90+4, Al Dali 90)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria	5	5	0	0	16	1	15
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	4	9	6
Afghanistan	4	0	2	2	2	4	2
Pakistan	5	0	2	3	1	9	2

Group F

Nov 18 – Kuala Lumpur
Nepal 0
Malaysia 1 (Faisal 56)

Nov 19 – Vientiane
Laos 0
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Xuan Son 67 pen, Pham Tuan Hai 90+2)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malaysia	5	5	0	0	15	1	15
Vietnam	5	4	0	1	11	5	12
Laos	5	1	0	4	3	16	3
Nepal	5	0	0	5	2	9	0

2025 FIFA ARAB CUP

Qualifying Round

Nov 25 – Al Rayyan
Palestine 0
Libya 0
Palestine win 4-3 on pens

Nov 25 – Al Rayyan
Mauritania 0
Kuwait 2 (Daham 8, 24)

Nov 25 – Doha
Syria 2 (Al Hallaq 52, Al Mawas 59)
South Sudan 0

Nov 26 – Doha
Oman 0
Somalia 0
Oman win 4-1 on pens

Nov 26 – Al Rayyan
Bahrain 1 (Al Romaihi 36)
Djibouti 0

Nov 26 – Al Rayyan
Sudan 2 (Haidar 43 og, Awad 74)
Lebanon 1 (Khamis 30)

Nov 26 – Doha
Comoros 4 (Zakouani 30 pen, Anbar 61 og, Amir 90+1 pen, 90+3)
Yemen 4 (Al Zubaidi 14, Al Gahwashi 40, Al Matari 45+2, 65)
Comoros win 4-2 on pens

FRIENDLIES

Nov 13 – Pathum Thani
Thailand 3 (Yooyen 15, Bunmathan 47, Ratree 53)
Singapore 2 (Kweh 17, 62)

Nov 13 – Abu Dhabi
Iran 0
Cape Verde 0
Iran win 5-4 on pens

Nov 13 – Jeddah
Algeria 3 (Bounedjah 14, Amoura 41, Hadjam 45+1)
Zimbabwe 1 (Chirewa 88 pen)

Nov 13 – Ostrava
Czech Republic 1 (Soucek 40)
San Marino 0

Nov 13 – Kaunas
Lithuania 0
Israel 0

Nov 13 – Skopje
North Macedonia 0
Latvia 0

Nov 13 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 1 (Wong Wai 31)
Cambodia 1 (Krya 33)

Nov 13 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 2 (Choudhury 46, 50 pen)
Nepal 2 (Chand 29, Tamang 90+3)

Nov 13 – Toronto
Canada 0
Ecuador 0

Nov 14 – Toyota
Japan 2 (Minamino 16, Doan 60)
Ghana 0

Nov 14 – Daejeon
South Korea 2 (Son Heung-min 57, Cho Gue-sung 88)
Bolivia 0

Nov 14 – Luanda
Angola 0
Argentina 2 (Lautaro 43, Messi 82)

Nov 14 – Abu Dhabi
Egypt 0
Uzbekistan 2 (Urunov 4, 43)

Nov 14 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Abu Al Shamat 8)
Ivory Coast 0

Nov 14 – Tunis
Tunisia 3 (Abdi 43, Talbi 66, Achouri 85)
Jordan 2 (Al Naimat 29, Jamous 50)

Nov 14 – Tangier
Morocco 1 (Ounahi 7)
Mozambique 0

Nov 14 – Mohammedia
Burkina Faso 3 (Kabore 34, 45+3, 57)
Niger 2 (Badamassi 24, Sosah 55)

Nov 14 – Seeb
Oman 2 (Al Aghbari 64, Al Alawi 79)
Sudan 0

Nov 14 – Berrechid
Uganda 2 (Mubiru 20 pen, Lorenzen 46)
Chad 1 (H. Tchaouna 64 pen)

Nov 14 – Moroni
Comoros 1 (Vita 85)
Namibia 0

Nov 14 – Houston
Venezuela 1 (Ramirez 38)
Australia 0

Nov 14 – St. George's
Grenada 4 (Muirhead 11, Charles-Cook 27, 34, Douglas 56)
US Virgin Islands 1 (Liburd 71)

Nov 15 – Gqeberha
South Africa 3 (Appollis 43, Nkota 62, Sithole 68)
Zambia 1 (Sabobo 90+2)

Nov 15 – Sochi
Russia 0
Chile 2 (Tapia 37, Brereton Diaz 76)

Nov 15 – London
Brazil 2 (Estevao 28, Casemiro 35)
Senegal 0

Nov 15 – Cairo
Kuwait 4 (Daham 46, 53, Nasser 64, Hassan Al Enezi 69)
Tanzania 3 (Charles 6, 87, Allarakhia 34)

Nov 15 – Chester
United States 2 (Reyna 4, Balogun 71)
Paraguay 1 (Arce 10)

Nov 15 – Benina
Libya 1 (Al Shalwi 31)
Mauritania 0

Nov 15 – Bloemfontein
Malawi 0
Lesotho 0

Nov 15 – Fort Lauderdale
Colombia 2 (Puerta 3, Carbonero 88)
New Zealand 1 (Old 80)

Nov 15 – Torreon
Mexico 0
Uruguay 0

Nov 17 – Abu Dhabi
Egypt 1 (Marmoush 57)
Cape Verde 1 (Rodrigues 7 pen)
Egypt win 2-0 on pens

Nov 17 – Doha
Qatar 1 (Gouda 9)
Zimbabwe 2 (Garan'anga 24, Antonio 74)

Nov 17 – Tampere
Finland 4 (Antman 18, Pukki 26, Pyyhtia 68, Walta 90+2)
Andorra 0

Nov 17 – Riffa
Bahrain 1 (Al Romaihi 35)
Somalia 2 (Omar 45, Marsis 80)

Nov 17 – Berrechid
Chad 2 (Mouandilmadji 45+2, M. Thiam 90+1 pen)
Mozambique 2 (Catamo 79 pen, Gildo 90+6)

Nov 17 – Moroni
Comoros 4 (M'Changama 4, Youssouf 22, Ahmed 69, Ben Nabouhane 77)
Namibia 0

Nov 18 – Cairo
Kuwait 2 (Nasser 65 pen, Al Sharifi 90+2)
Gambia 2 (A. Ceesay 42, 57)

Nov 18 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Lee Tae-seok 63)
Ghana 0

Nov 18 – Tokyo
Japan 3 (Kamada 4, Machino 72, Nakamura 78)
Bolivia 0

Nov 18 – Seeb
Oman 0
Ivory Coast 2 (Bayo 9, Krasso 25)

Nov 18 – Antalya
Senegal 8 (Jackson 9, 15, E. Diouf 12, Mane 17, 31 pen, 35, Mbaye 48, C. Ndiaye 80 pen)
Kenya 0

Nov 18 – Abu Dhabi
Uzbekistan 0
Iran 0
Uzbekistan win 4-3 on pens

Nov 18 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 0
Algeria 2 (Mahrez 75 pen, Belghali 85)

Nov 18 – Sochi
Chile 2 (Loyola 53, Osorio 60)
Peru 1 (Valera 34 pen)

Nov 18 – Tangier
Morocco 4 (Achai 4 og, Saibari 33, Rahimi 79 pen, El Khannouss 88)
Uganda 0

Nov 18 – Lille
Brazil 1 (Estevao 44 pen)
Tunisia 1 (Mastouri 23)

Nov 18 – Limassol
Cyprus 2 (Andreou 16, Kakoullis 48)
Estonia 4 (Kyprianou 44 og, Sappinen 78, 83, 87)

Nov 18 – Pula
Faroe Islands 1 (Knudsen 25)
Kazakhstan 0

Nov 18 – Luanda
Angola 3 (Milson 5, Luvumbo 41, Mabululu 58)
Zambia 2 (Lahne 21, F. Sakala 48)

Nov 18 – Mohammedia
Benin 0
Burkina Faso 3 (Minoungou 25, 45+3, Simpore 90+4)

Nov 18 – Berrechid
Niger 1 (Sako 84)
Guinea 1 (Balde 59)

Nov 18 – Bloemfontein
Lesotho 0
Malawi 1 (Malango 25)

Nov 18 – Tunis
Jordan 0
Mali 0

Other Friendlies

Nov 11: Papua New Guinea (Red) 1-1 Vanuatu
Nov 12: Cuba 3-0 St Lucia; Dominican Republic 2-0 St Vincent & Grenadines; Dominica 1-2 St Martin; St Kitts & Nevis 0-0 Sint-Maarten; Barbados 3-2 Bonaire; Antigua & Barbuda 0-0 Aruba; Bahamas 1-2 Anguilla; Cayman Islands 1-2 British Virgin Islands
Nov 13: India 6-1 Bhutan; Papua New Guinea (Gold) 1-0 Solomon Islands
Nov 14: Kenya 0-1 Equatorial Guinea
Nov 15: Guinea 2-0 Liberia; Papua New Guinea (Red) 0-1 Fiji; Martinique 0-2 Cuba; St Vincent & Grenadines 3-1 St Lucia; Dominica 2-3 Sint-Maarten; St Martin 0-1 Belize; Barbados 0-3 Aruba; Guyana 2-1 Bonaire; Bahamas 0-6 British Virgin Islands; Cayman Islands 4-0 Anguilla
Nov 17: Madagascar 2-0 Equatorial Guinea; Vanuatu 2-0 Fiji
Nov 18: Dominican Republic 0-0 Martinique; St Kitts & Nevis 2-6 Belize; Antigua & Barbuda 1-4 Guyana
Nov 20: Papua New Guinea (Gold) 2-0 Fiji; Vanuatu 2-1 Solomon Islands
Nov 22: Fiji 1-1 Solomon Islands *(abandoned)*
Nov 23: Papua New Guinea (Gold) 2-2 Vanuatu *(Vanuatu win 5-4 on pens)*

Club Football
EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 5

Nov 25 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 0
Benfica (Por) 2 (Dahl 6, Barreiro 90)

Nov 25 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 0
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (David 57)

Nov 25 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 4 (Guirassy 45+2, 54, Adeyemi 58, Svensson 90+5)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Nov 25 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 3 (Kounde 27 og, Estevao 55, Delap 73)
Barcelona (Spa) 0

Nov 25 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Blomberg 27, Fet 87 pen)
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Openda 48, McKennie 59, David 90+1)

Nov 25 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Grimaldo 23, Schick 54)

Nov 25 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 2 (Aubameyang 46, 50)
Newcastle United (Eng) 1 (Barnes 6)

Nov 25 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0
Athletic Club (Spa) 0

Nov 25 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 2 (McTominay 65, Jankovic 72 og)
Qarabag (Aze) 0

Nov 26 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 3 (Dadason 26, Larsson 59 pen, Robert 73)
Kairat (Kaz) 2 (Satpayev 81, Baybek 90)

Nov 26 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 2 (Luiz 18, Salisu 88 og)
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Minamino 5, Balogun 26)

Nov 26 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Timber 22, Madueke 69, Martinelli 77)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Karl 32)

Nov 26 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Alvarez 9, Gimenez 90+3)
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Zielinski 54)

Nov 26 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0
Atalanta (Ita) 3 (Lookman 60, Ederson 62, De Ketelaere 65)

Nov 26 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Szoboszlai 16)
PSV (Ned) 4 (Perisic 6 pen, Til 56, Driouech 73, 90+1)

Nov 26 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 3 (Chiquinho 8, Taremi 52, El Kaabi 81)
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (Mbappe 22, 24, 29, 60)

Nov 26 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 5 (Vitinha 45, 53, 76 pen, Fabian 59, Pacho 65)
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 3 (Richarlison 35, Kolo Muani 50, 73)

Nov 26 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 3 (Quenda 24, Suarez 31, Trincao 70)
Club Brugge (Bel) 0

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 5

Nov 27 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (El Aynaoui 7, El Shaarawy 83)
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Paulinho 86)

Nov 27 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Malen 27, 42)
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Monteiro 90)

Nov 27 – Porto
Porto (Por) 3 (Veiga 1, 33, Aghehowa 61 pen)
Nice (Fra) 0

Nov 27 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Nov 27 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Talisca 69)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Varga 66)

Nov 27 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 1 (Ueda 11)
Celtic (Sco) 3 (Yang Hyun-jun 31, Hatate 43, Nygren 82)

Nov 27 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 4 (Correia 21, Mukau 36, Igamane 69, Andre 86)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0

Nov 27 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 1 (Ivanusec 64)
Brann (Nor) 1 (Kornvig 89)

Nov 27 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 3 (Stanic 11 pen, 49, 62 pen)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Duran 70, El-Abdellaoui 90+6)

Nov 27 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 4 (Odgaard 26, Dallinga 51, Bernardeschi 53, Orsolini 86)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 1 (Vertessen 33)

Nov 27 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Duarte 50)
FCSB (Rou) 0

Nov 27 – Deventer
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 0
Stuttgart (Ger) 4 (Leweling 20, 35, El Khannouss 59, Bouanani 90+3)

Nov 27 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 2 (Oh Hyeon-gyu 14, Karetsas 45+2)
Basel (Sui) 1 (Otele 51)

Nov 27 – Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0
Lyon (Fra) 6 (Abner 4, Tolisso 25, 51, 53, Niakhate 35 pen, Karabec 62)

Nov 27 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 3 (Yates 27, Kalimuendo 44, Milenkovic 59)
Malmo (Swe) 0

Nov 27 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Swiderski 18, Calabria 74)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Kiteishvili 34)

Nov 27 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Tavernier 45+3 pen)
Braga (Por) 1 (Martinez 69)

Nov 27 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Hernandez 42, Ezzalzouli 50)
Utrecht (Ned) 1 (Rodriguez 59)

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 4

Nov 27 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (De Wit 70, Jensen 86)
Shelbourne (Irl) 0

Nov 27 – Ta'Qali
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 3 (El Fanis 65, Smajlagic 74, Coric 90+2)
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1 (Lopes 57)

Nov 27 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 2 (Cuze 78, Bilbija 82)
BK Hacken (Swe) 1 (Andersen 40)

Nov 27 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Ismaheel 67, Agnero 90+5)
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 0

Nov 27 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 2 (Semedo 34 pen, Neophytou 59)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0

Nov 27 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 4 (Brunes 27 pen, Diaby-Fadiga 40, 51, 53)
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1 (Antiste 75)

Nov 27 – Olomouc
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 2 (Ghali 8, 42)
Celje (Svn) 1 (Vidovic 29)

Nov 27 – Craiova
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1 (Al Hamlawi 67 pen)
Mainz (Ger) 0

Nov 27 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2 (Kashia 49, Yirajang 52)
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 1 (Perez 24)

Nov 27 – Aberdeen
Aberdeen (Sco) 1 (Nisbet 45)
Noah (Arm) 1 (Mulahusejnovic 52)

Nov 27 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 0
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Gacinovic 35)

Nov 27 – Reykjavik
Breidablik (Isl) 2 (Ingvarsson 6, Kristinsson 72)
Samsunspor (Tur) 2 (Mouandilmadji 20, 55)

Nov 27 – Pristina
Drita (Kos) 1 (Manaj 20)
Shkendija (Mkd) 0

Nov 27 – Rijeka
Rijeka (Cro) 0
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0

Nov 27 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Pululu 51)
KuPS (Fin) 0

Nov 27 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 0
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Preciado 41)

Nov 27 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 2 (Emegha 53, El Mourabet 77)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 1 (Mitchell 35)

Nov 27 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Malley 87)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Kaua Elias 23, Nazaryna 77)

Final Tables 2025

BELARUS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ML Vitebsk (C)	30	21	5	4	53	18	68
Dinamo Minsk	30	19	6	5	52	27	63
Slavia Mozyr	30	17	6	7	53	32	57
Dynamo Brest	30	15	6	9	42	30	51
Minsk	30	15	6	9	48	47	51
Torpedo-BelAZ Zhodino	30	13	10	7	43	30	49
Isloch Minsk Raion	30	12	13	5	45	26	49
Neman Grodno	30	14	3	13	41	31	45
Gomel	30	12	7	11	35	34	43
BATE Borisov	30	11	7	12	38	43	40
Arsenal Dzerzhinsk	30	7	12	11	27	35	33
Vitebsk*	30	9	4	17	37	46	28
Naftan Novopolotsk	30	8	4	18	35	55	28
Smorgon** (R)	30	7	7	16	23	43	28
Slutsk (R)	30	5	6	19	20	51	21
Molodechno (R)	30	3	2	25	19	63	11

*Deducted 3 points
**Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Dec 3: Smorgon 1-0 Belshina Bobruisk
Dec 6:
Belshina Bobruisk 1-0 Smorgon (agg 1-1, *AET, Belshina Bobruisk win 6-5 on pens)*

ESTONIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Flora (C)	36	26	4	6	84	31	82
FCI Levadia	36	25	4	7	89	36	79
Nomme Kalju	36	23	5	8	69	37	74
Paide Linnameeskond	36	21	7	8	63	32	70
Narva Trans	36	15	6	15	53	52	51
Vaprus	36	14	7	15	54	51	49
Harju	36	10	6	20	49	70	36
Tammeka	36	9	3	24	47	83	30
Kuressaare*	36	8	4	24	32	67	28
Tallinna Kalev (R)	36	5	2	29	32	113	17

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Nov 22: Viimsi 0-1 Kuressaare
Nov 29: Kuressaare 2-0 Viimsi (agg 3-0)

FAROE ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KI Klaksvik (C)	27	23	4	0	92	18	73
HB Torshavn	27	20	4	3	70	35	64
NSI Runavik	27	19	3	5	92	37	60
Vikingur	27	12	8	7	42	29	44
B36 Torshavn	27	12	6	9	45	39	42
B68 Toftir	27	6	8	13	35	61	26
EB/Streymur	27	6	8	13	30	58	26
07 Vestur	27	4	3	20	34	54	15
Suduroy (R)	27	4	3	20	25	71	15
TB Tvoroyri (R)	27	2	7	18	25	88	13

FINLAND

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Inter Turku	22	13	7	2	46	20	46
Ilves	22	14	3	5	47	27	45
HJK	22	14	2	6	59	29	44
KuPS	22	13	5	4	39	23	44
SJK	22	12	5	5	45	31	41
Gnistan	22	7	7	8	34	39	28
VPS	22	6	7	9	32	34	25
Jaro	22	7	4	11	25	36	25
IFK Mariehamn	22	5	6	11	25	48	21
AC Oulu	22	5	3	14	30	48	18
Haka	22	4	4	14	27	43	16
KTP	22	3	5	14	24	55	14

Top six teams enter championship round, bottom six teams enter relegation round

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KuPS (C)	32	20	7	5	62	34	67
Inter Turku	32	17	10	5	60	33	61
Ilves	32	18	6	8	68	45	60
SJK	32	17	8	7	70	51	59
HJK	32	14	7	11	74	52	49
Gnistan	32	8	9	15	47	65	33

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jaro	27	10	4	13	35	44	34
IFK Mariehamn	27	8	8	11	34	53	32
VPS	27	8	7	12	37	42	31
AC Oulu	27	8	3	16	35	53	27
KTP* (R)	27	5	6	16	31	61	21
Haka (R)	27	4	5	18	30	50	17

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Oct 23: TPS 3-0 KPT
Oct 26: KPT 2-3 TPS (agg 2-6)

GEORGIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iberia 1999 (C)	36	24	8	4	60	24	80
Dila Gori	36	25	3	8	63	35	78
Torpedo Kutaisi	36	18	9	9	63	41	63
Dinamo Tbilisi	36	15	12	9	51	34	57
Gagra	36	12	7	17	44	55	43
Dinamo Batumi	36	11	10	15	40	59	43
Samgurali Tskaltubo	36	12	6	18	54	53	42
Telavi*	36	9	9	18	36	59	36
Gareji*	36	7	13	16	41	54	34
Kolkheti-1913 (R)	36	5	7	24	33	71	22

*Enter promotion-relegation play-offs (incomplete at the time of printing)

ICELAND

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vikingur Reykjavik	22	12	6	4	47	27	42
Valur	22	12	4	6	53	35	40
Stjarnan	22	12	4	6	43	35	40
Breidablik	22	9	7	6	37	35	34
FH Hafnarfjordur	22	8	6	8	41	35	30
Fram	22	8	5	9	32	31	29
IBV Vestmannaeyjar	22	8	5	9	24	28	29
KA Akureyri	22	8	5	9	29	39	29
Vestri	22	8	3	11	23	28	27
KR Reykjavik	22	6	6	10	42	51	24
IA Akranes	22	7	1	14	26	43	22
Afturelding	22	5	6	11	29	39	21

Top six teams enter championship round, bottom six teams enter relegation round

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vikingur Reykjavik (C)	27	17	6	4	58	31	57
Valur	27	13	6	8	61	46	45
Stjarnan	27	12	6	9	50	45	42
Breidablik	27	11	9	7	46	42	42
Fram	27	10	6	11	41	40	36
FH Hafnarfjordur	27	8	9	10	49	46	33

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
KA Akureyri	27	11	6	10	45	49	39
IA Akranes	27	11	1	15	37	50	34
IBV Vestmannaeyjar	27	9	6	12	34	37	33
KR Reykjavik	27	8	7	12	55	62	31
Vestri (R)	27	8	5	14	26	44	29
Afturelding (R)	27	6	9	12	36	46	27

KAZAKHSTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kairat (C)	26	18	5	3	53	19	59
Astana	26	17	6	3	66	30	57
Tobol	26	16	6	4	45	25	54
Yelimay Semey	26	14	6	6	47	31	48
Aktobe	26	13	4	9	39	29	43
Zhenys Astana	26	8	12	6	37	30	36
Ordabasy	26	9	8	9	37	28	35
Okzhetpes	26	10	5	11	37	43	35
Kyzylzhar	26	6	9	11	25	32	27
Ulytau Zhezkazgan	26	5	8	13	20	41	23
Kaysar	26	3	13	10	24	42	22
Zhetysu	26	4	9	13	19	43	21
Atyrau	26	4	7	15	22	45	19
Turan (R)	26	4	4	18	25	58	16

LATVIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Riga (C)	36	27	7	2	85	26	88
RFS	36	28	3	5	100	39	87
Liepaja	36	18	7	11	58	54	61
Daugavpils	36	13	9	14	52	62	48
Auda	36	13	6	17	44	49	45
Jelgava	36	8	14	14	38	45	38
Tukums 2000	36	9	9	18	39	63	36
Super Nova	36	6	14	16	44	56	32
Grobina*	36	8	8	20	33	64	32
Metta (R)	36	8	7	21	39	74	31

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Nov 20: Grobina 0-0 Alberts JDFS
Nov 23:
Alberts JDFS 0-1 Grobina (agg 0-1)

LITHUANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kauno Zalgiris (C)	36	22	9	5	67	26	75
Hegelmann	36	21	4	11	56	43	67
Zalgiris	36	17	11	8	54	41	62
Suduva	36	15	14	7	48	36	59
Siauliai	36	14	10	12	59	53	52
Panevezys	36	14	7	15	56	49	49
Dziugas	36	13	7	16	37	45	46
Banga	36	11	9	16	38	36	42
Riteriai*	36	6	8	22	37	74	26
Dainava (R)	36	3	9	24	27	76	18

*Enter promotion-relegation play-off

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Nov 15: Neptunas 0-0 Riteriai
Nov 22:
Riteriai 2-1 Neptunas (agg 2-1)

NORWAY

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Viking (C)	30	22	5	3	77	36	71
Bodo/Glimt	30	22	4	4	85	28	70
Tromso	30	18	3	9	50	36	57
Brann	30	17	5	8	55	46	56
Sandefjord	30	15	3	12	55	42	48
Valerenga	30	13	4	13	49	50	43
Rosenborg	30	11	9	10	45	42	42
Fredrikstad	30	11	9	10	38	35	42
Sarpsborg	30	11	8	11	48	50	41
Molde	30	12	3	15	46	42	39
HamKam	30	10	7	13	42	47	37
KFUM Oslo	30	8	11	11	42	41	35
Kristiansund	30	9	7	14	34	59	34
Bryne*	30	8	7	15	37	56	31
Stromsgodset (R)	30	6	2	22	37	72	20
Haugesund (R)	30	2	3	25	22	80	9

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off v Aalesund (incomplete at the time of printing)*

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shamrock Rovers (C)	36	19	9	8	56	33	66
Derry City	36	18	9	9	52	39	63
Shelbourne	36	15	14	7	48	37	59
Bohemians	36	16	6	14	48	39	54
St Patrick's Athletic	36	13	13	10	42	32	52
Drogheda United	36	12	15	9	38	38	51
Sligo Rovers	36	11	8	17	42	54	41
Galway United	36	9	12	15	37	44	39
Waterford*	36	11	6	19	41	60	39
Cork City (R)	36	4	12	20	33	61	24

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Nov 2: Bray Wanderers 1-2 Waterford

SWEDEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mjallby (C)	30	23	6	1	57	18	75
Hammarby	30	19	5	6	60	29	62
GAIS	30	14	10	6	45	30	52
IFK Goteborg	30	16	3	11	41	33	51
Djurgarden	30	13	10	7	52	32	49
Malmo	30	13	10	7	46	33	49
AIK	30	13	9	8	40	33	48
Elfsborg	30	12	4	14	45	51	40
Sirius	30	11	6	13	53	51	39
BK Hacken	30	9	8	13	42	50	35
Halmstads	30	10	5	15	24	50	35
IF Brommapojkarna	30	9	4	17	40	47	31
Degerfors	30	8	6	16	33	52	30
Norrkoping* (R)	30	8	5	17	40	57	29
Osters (R)	30	6	8	16	29	48	26
Varnamo (R)	30	3	7	20	36	69	16

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

Nov 22: Orgryte 3-0 Norrkoping
Nov 29: Norrkoping 0-0 Orgryte (agg 0-3)

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Final

Nov 29 – Lima
Palmeiras (Bra) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Danilo 67)

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Final

Nov 22 – Asuncion
Lanus (Arg) 0
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0
After Extra-Time. Lanus win 5-4 on pens

CONCACAF

2025 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Final

Nov 25: O&M (Dom) 0-1 Mount Pleasant (Jam)
Dec 2:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 2-2 O&M (Dom) (agg 3-2)

2025 CONCACAF CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Final

Nov 25: Alajuelense (Crc) 1-1 Xelaju (Gua)
Dec 3:
Xelaju (Gua) 1-1 Alajuelense (Crc) (agg 2-2, *AET, Alajuelense win 4-3 on pens*)

Final Tables 2025

CANADA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Forge* (S)	28	16	10	2	51	22	58
Atletico Ottawa* (C)	28	15	11	2	54	28	56
Cavalry*	28	11	9	8	47	36	42
HFX Wanderers*	28	11	6	11	41	34	39
York United*	28	10	8	10	43	38	38
Valour	28	7	5	16	35	62	26
Pacific	28	5	8	15	30	59	23
Vancouver	28	4	9	15	35	57	21

**Advance to play-offs*

Play-In

Oct 22 – Halifax
HFX Wanderers 2 (Coimbra 45+1, Gagnon-Lapare 114)
York United 2 (Altobelli 86, Hundal 119)
After Extra-Time; York United win 5-4 on pens

Quarter-Final

Oct 26 – Calgary
Cavalry 4 (Musse 8, Warschewski 17, 58, Singh 47 og)
York United 1 (Hundal 44)

First Semi-Final

Oct 26 – Hamilton
Forge 1 (Choiniere 23)
Atletico Ottawa 2 (Antinoro 33, Salter 58)

Second Semi-Final

Nov 2 – Hamilton
Forge 0
Cavalry 1 (Warschewski 57)

Final

Nov 2 – Ottawa
Atletico Ottawa 2 (Rodriguez 40, 107)
Cavalry 1 (Aird 33 pen)
After Extra-Time

ASIA

2025-26 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 5

Nov 24 – Qarshi
Nasaf (Uzb) 0
Tractor (Irn) 1 (Lushkja 17)

Nov 24 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 2 (Santos 9, Bala 28)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 0

Nov 24 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 4 (Boulbina 5, 33, 53, Piatek 74)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 2 (Benzema 76, 83)

Nov 24 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 0
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Camara 81)

Nov 25 – Abu Dhabi
Al Wahda (UAE) 3 (Tadic 55, 66, Canedo 87)
Al Sadd (Qat) 0

Nov 25 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 4 (Marcos Leonardo 45, 72, Milinkovic-Savic 63, Cancelo 90+3)
Al Shorta (Irq) 0

East Region

Matchday 5

Nov 25 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 2 (Caputo 3, Memeti 90+2)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0

Nov 25 – Chuncheon
Gangwon FC (Kor) 1 (Park Ho-young 55)
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 2 (Sento 24, Shimoda 28, Oh Se-hun 39)

Nov 25 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 1 (Mateus Vital 57)
FC Seoul (Kor) 3 (Lingard 48, 77, Lucas 61)

Nov 25 – Chengdu
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 1 (Felipe 54 pen)
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Kato 63)

Nov 26 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 0
Buriram United (Tha) 0

Nov 26 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Ideguchi 31, Yamakawa 39)

2025-26 GULF CLUB CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 30:
Al Ain (UAE) 4-1 Sitra (Bhr);
Zakho (Irq) 3-1 Al Qadsia (Kuw)
Oct 22:
Sitra (Bhr) 0-0 Zakho (Irq);
Al Qadsia (Kuw) 0-1 Al Ain (UAE)
Nov 4:
Sitra (Bhr) 0-0 Al Qadsia (Kuw);
Zakho (Irq) 2-0 Al Ain (UAE)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zakho	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
Al Ain	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Sitra	3	0	2	1	1	4	2
Al Qadsia	3	0	1	2	1	4	1

Group B

Oct 1:
Al Rayyan (Qat) 5-0 Al-Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem); Al Shabab (KSA) 1-1 Al Nahda (Oma)
Oct 21-22:
Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem) 2-0 Al Shabab (KSA); Al Nahda (Oma) 1-1 Al Rayyan (Qat)
Nov 5:
Al Nahda (Oma) 1-1 Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem); Al Rayyan (Qat) 1-1 Al Shabab (KSA)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Rayyan	3	1	2	0	7	2	5
Al Tadamun	3	1	1	1	3	6	4
Al Nahda	3	0	3	0	3	3	3
Al Shabab	3	0	2	1	2	4	2

Final Tables 2025

CHINA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shanghai Port (C)	30	20	6	4	72	44	66
Shanghai Shenhua	30	19	7	4	67	35	64
Chengdu Rongcheng	30	17	9	4	60	28	60
Beijing Guoan	30	17	6	7	69	46	57
Shandong Taishan	30	15	8	7	69	46	53
Tianjin Jinmen Tiger	30	12	8	10	40	41	44
Zhejiang	30	10	12	8	60	51	42
Yunnan Yukun	30	11	9	10	47	52	42
Qingdao West Coast	30	10	10	10	39	43	40
Henan	30	10	7	13	52	48	37
Dalian Yingbo	30	9	9	12	30	45	36
Shenzhen Peng City	30	8	3	19	35	59	27
Wuhan Three Towns	30	6	7	17	34	62	25
Qingdao Hainiu	30	5	10	15	35	48	25
Meizhou Hakka (R)	30	5	6	19	36	71	21
Changchun Yatai (R)	30	4	7	19	26	52	19

KYRGYZSTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bars Issyk-Kul (C)	26	19	4	3	51	21	61
Muras United	26	19	3	4	59	24	60
Abdysh-Ata	26	17	3	6	47	29	54
Dordoi Bishkek	26	16	6	4	42	27	54
Alay Osh	26	15	4	7	44	26	49
OshSU-Aldier	26	12	6	8	39	32	42
Ozgon	26	10	5	11	33	27	35
Talant	26	10	2	14	31	37	32
Neftchi Kochkor-Ata	26	7	5	14	33	40	26
Kyrgyzaltyn	26	7	4	15	22	49	25
Alga Bishkek	26	6	6	14	27	37	24
Ilbirs	26	5	6	15	23	47	21
Bishkek City	26	5	4	17	26	48	19
Asiagoal (R)	26	4	2	20	24	57	14

SOUTH KOREA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jeonbuk HM (C)	38	23	10	5	64	32	79
Daejeon Hana Citizen	38	18	11	9	58	46	65
Gimcheon Sangmu	38	18	7	13	59	45	61
Pohang Steelers	38	16	8	14	41	46	56
Gangwon FC	38	13	13	12	37	41	52
FC Seoul	38	12	13	13	50	52	49
Gwangju FC	38	15	9	14	40	41	54
FC Anyang	38	14	7	17	49	47	49
Ulsan HD	38	11	11	16	42	50	44
Suwon FC*	38	11	9	18	51	58	42
Jeju SK**	38	10	9	19	40	53	39
Daegu FC (R)	38	7	13	18	47	67	34

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off v Bucheon FC 1995 (incomplete at the time of printing)*
***Enter promotion-relegation play-off v Suwon Bluewings (incomplete at the time of printing)*

UZBEKISTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Neftchi (C)	30	19	7	4	49	24	64
Pakhtakor	30	18	6	6	59	23	60
Nasaf	30	16	11	3	51	23	59
Dinamo Samarkand	30	16	10	4	47	30	58
Bunyodkor	30	13	10	7	48	40	49
OKMK	30	14	6	10	44	34	48
Navbahor Namangan	30	10	10	10	41	37	40
Sogdiana	30	10	7	13	37	37	37
Qizilqum	30	9	9	12	28	44	36
Surkhon Termiz	30	9	8	13	26	30	35
Andijon	30	9	8	13	39	51	35
Kokand 1912*	30	9	7	14	24	39	34
Mash'al*	30	8	6	16	22	48	30
Khorazm*	30	7	6	17	33	39	27
Bukhara*	30	6	9	15	30	49	27
Shurtan (R)	30	3	8	19	27	57	17

**Enter relegation play-offs (incomplete at the time of printing)*

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Nov 22 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 3 (Katebe 13 og, Chouiar 16, Bassene 65 pen)
Power Dynamos (Zam) 0

Nov 22 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (Atef 52, 57, 72)
Rivers United (Nga) 0

Nov 28 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 1 (Camara 37 og)
RS Berkane (Mar) 2 (El Kaabi 90+7, Chouiar 90+8)

Nov 29 – Ndola
Power Dynamos (Zam) 0
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Reda 51)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Pyramids	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Rivers United	2	0	0	2	1	5	0
Power Dynamos	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group B

Nov 22 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 4 (Trezeguet 36, 84, Sherif 39, Hadid 90+3 og)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 1 (El Shenawy 57 og)

Nov 22 – Zanzibar City
Young Africans (Taz) 1 (Dube 58)
AS FAR (Mar) 0

Nov 28 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Bouriga 37)
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Trezeguet 68)

Nov 28 – Tizi Ouzou
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0
Young Africans (Taz) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly	2	1	1	0	5	2	4
Young Africans	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
AS FAR	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
JS Kabylie	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

Group C

Nov 21 – Kigali
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 2 (Raouf 45+2, Abdelrahman 75)
MC Alger (Alg) 1 (Karshoum 53 og)

Nov 21 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 3 (Santos 5, 77, Allende 61)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Kashala 44)

Nov 28 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Nov 30 – Lubumbashi
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Kashala 79)
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 1 (Raouf 12)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Al Hilal	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
MC Alger	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
St-Eloi Lupopo	2	0	1	1	2	4	1

Group D

Nov 22 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Stade Malien (Mli) 0

Nov 22 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 0
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Benny 78)

Nov 29 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Reis 49)
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Diakite 89)

Nov 29 – Bamako
Stade Malien (Mli) 2 (Nkeng 16, Simpara 23)
Simba (Tan) 1 (Maema 54)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Petro Atletico	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Stade Malien	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Esperance	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Simba	2	0	0	2	1	3	0

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Nov 23 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 3 (Ghacha 17, Alilet 61, Radouani 82)
San Pedro (Civ) 2 (Kamagate 65, Karamoko 90+7)

Nov 23 – Bamako
Djoliba (Mli) 0
Olympic Safi (Mar) 1 (Errahouli 29)

Nov 28 – Safi
Olympic Safi (Mar) 0
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Draoui 84)

Nov 30 – San Pedro
San Pedro (Civ) 2 (Kamagate 21, 29)
Djoliba (Mli) 0

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
San Pedro	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Olympic Safi	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Djoliba	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group B

Nov 23 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 3 (Boucheta 3, Bouchouari 44, Rayhi 86)
Nairobi United (Ken) 0

Nov 23 – Kinshasa
Maniema Union (Cod) 2 (Panzi 43, Ozome 85)
Azam (Tan) 0

Nov 28 – Zanzibar City
Azam (Tan) 0
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Amrabat 57)

Nov 30 – Nairobi
Nairobi United (Ken) 0
Maniema Union (Cod) 1 (Mboma Kinda 66)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wydad	2	2	0	0	4	0	6
Maniema Union	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Azam	2	0	0	2	0	3	0
Nairobi United	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group C

Nov 22 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 2 (Belhocini 5, Benguit 14)
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 0

Nov 23 – Cape Town
Stellenbosch (RSA) 1 (Cupido 90+3)
AS Otoho (Cgo) 0

Nov 30 – Brazzaville
AS Otoho (Cgo) 4 (Bowamba 12, Diallo 26, Duvan 29, Dion 65)
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Meziane 81 pen)

Nov 30 – Zanzibar City
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 1 (Tchakei 90+1)
Stellenbosch (RSA) 1 (Phili 52)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stellenbosch	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
AS Otoho	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
CR Belouizdad	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Singida Black Stars	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

Group D

Nov 23 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 1 (Jaziri 42)
ZESCO United (Zam) 0

Nov 23 – Suez
Al Masry (Egy) 2 (Mugisha 59 pen, Hashem 87)
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1 (Solomons 66)

Nov 30 – Johannesburg
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1 (Sobhy 90+6 og)
Zamalek (Egy) 1 (Jaziri 3)

Nov 30 – Ndola
ZESCO United (Zam) 2 (Kouablan 5, Musukuma 87)
Al Masry (Egy) 3 (Hashem 4, Temine 24, Deghmoum 68)

Latest Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Masry	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Zamalek	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Kaizer Chiefs	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
ZESCO United	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

2025 EGYPTIAN SUPER CUP

Semi-Finals

Nov 6: Al Ahly 2-1 Ceramica Cleopatra; Zamalek 0-0 Pyramids *(Zamalek win 5-4 on pens)*

Third Place Play-Off

Nov 9: Ceramica Cleopatra 2-1 Pyramids

Final

Nov 9: Al Ahly 2-0 Zamalek

Final Tables 2025

REUNION

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint-Pierroise (C)	26	17	6	3	42	21	83
Saint-Denis	26	16	6	4	56	22	80
Excelsior	26	15	8	3	51	17	79
Saint-Pauloise	26	14	6	6	42	22	74
Jeanne d'Arc	26	13	5	8	35	30	70
Dominicaine	26	11	9	6	39	23	68
Tamponnaise	26	8	11	7	31	24	61
Sainte Rose	26	8	9	9	34	26	59
Trois Bassins	26	10	3	13	27	38	59
Piton	26	8	6	12	18	35	56
Saint-Louisienne (R)	26	5	13	8	16	27	54
St. Louis (R)	26	5	7	14	23	35	48
Marsouins (R)	26	3	6	17	12	50	41
Riviere des Galets (R)	26	1	1	24	10	66	30

Win = 4 pts, Draw = 2 pts, Loss = 1 pt

ZIMBABWE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Scottland (C)	34	20	9	5	47	20	69
MWOS	34	17	11	6	36	23	62
Simba Bhora	34	16	13	5	37	21	61
Ngezi Platinum Stars	34	14	13	7	41	30	55
TelOne	34	14	12	8	40	26	54
Platinum	34	10	19	5	28	20	49
Herentals College	34	12	12	10	29	26	48
ZPC Kariba	34	9	17	8	29	26	44
CAPS United	34	11	10	13	26	28	43
Manica Diamonds	34	8	17	9	21	24	41
Highlanders	34	7	18	9	29	28	39
Chicken Inn	34	9	12	13	23	25	39
Dynamos	34	8	15	11	20	26	39
Triangle United	34	8	14	12	36	33	38
GreenFuel (R)	34	7	16	11	28	30	37
Bikita Minerals (R)	34	9	10	15	25	38	37
Yadah (R)	34	8	11	15	23	30	35
Kwekwe United (R)	34	1	7	26	15	79	10

OCEANIA

COOK ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tupapa Maraerenga (C)	15	12	1	2	52	7	37
Nikao Sokattak	15	9	2	4	58	29	29
Matavera-Ngatangiia	15	7	6	2	49	26	27
Avatiu	15	3	3	9	18	42	12
Titikaveka	15	3	2	10	15	44	11
Puaikura	15	3	2	10	23	67	11

SAMOA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vaipuna*	11	11	0	0	63	5	33
Lupe o le Soaga*	11	9	1	1	51	13	28
Vaivase-Tai*	11	7	2	2	60	15	23
Lepea*	11	7	0	4	49	16	21
USP Alafua Campus*	11	7	0	4	33	34	21
Vailima Kiwi*	11	5	3	3	26	15	18
Sogi*	11	5	1	5	43	22	16
Vaitele-Uta*	11	5	0	6	36	40	15
Faatoia United	11	3	1	7	24	38	10
Moaula United	11	2	0	9	17	69	6
Brothers United	11	1	0	10	12	108	3
Moata'a	11	0	0	11	3	42	0

**Advance to championship round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vaipuna (C)	7	7	0	0	19	5	21
Lupe o le Soaga	7	6	0	1	25	6	18
Vaivase-Tai	7	5	0	2	14	8	15
Vaitele-Uta	7	3	1	3	15	18	10
Lepea	7	2	2	3	12	20	8
Sogi	7	2	0	5	17	13	6
Vailima Kiwi	7	0	2	5	6	19	2
USP Alafua Campus	7	0	1	6	4	23	1

SOLOMON ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Central Coast (C)	22	17	3	2	86	19	54
Malaita Kingz	22	15	6	1	66	15	51
Green Shield	22	14	5	3	45	23	47
Honiara City	22	15	1	6	59	27	46
KOSSA	22	12	5	5	54	28	41
Marist	22	8	4	10	28	39	28
SOSA	22	7	4	11	29	38	25
Ghupo	22	7	2	13	27	53	23
Waneagu United	22	3	10	9	22	46	19
Laugu United	22	4	4	14	30	48	16
Juniper Tree	22	4	2	16	25	91	14
Southern United	22	1	4	17	16	60	7

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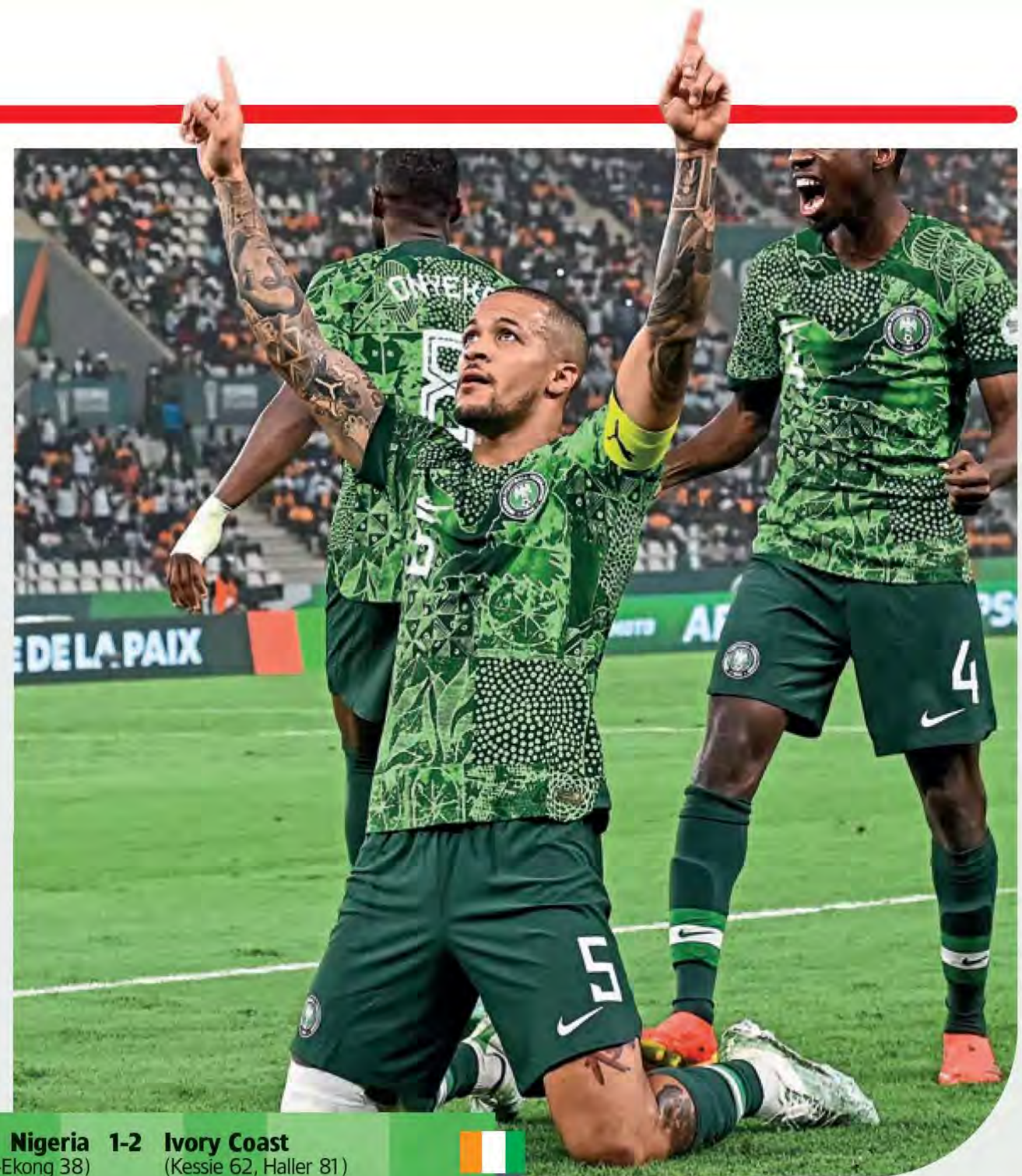
William Troost-Ekong

Nigeria v Ivory Coast

2023 AFCON final, Abidjan, Ivory Coast

The Player of the Tournament at the last edition of the Africa Cup of Nations looks back on the final and how close he came to becoming a champion with Nigeria



AFCON hero ...Troost-Ekong celebrates scoring at the 2023 finals in the Ivory Coast

"AFCON is the pride of the continent. It's such a competitive tournament that's had so many different winners. I vividly remember watching Nigeria win in 2013 and seeing what that meant to the country. When I became part of the squad, I'd hear stories from Ahmed Musa and Kenneth Omeruo about how that impacted their lives.

Reaching the final is the pinnacle of my career so far, but before the tournament I was even debating whether to continue with the national team. I'd fallen out with the coach, Jose Peseiro, in September and hadn't been called up for the two camps after that.

Just before the squad was announced, he said he'd bring me for my experience but couldn't guarantee I would play. I was just really happy to be involved. If this was going to be my last taste of international football, I was determined to enjoy it.

After playing well in our last friendly, I started the opening game. We drew 1-1 with Equatorial Guinea, so I thought I might be dropped, but then I scored the winner from the penalty spot as we beat Ivory Coast. I injured my hamstring during that game, and couldn't really train for the rest of the tournament, but I kept my place in the team.

You could feel the excitement on the day of the final. We understood the magnitude of the occasion – the chance to go down in history. I remember trying to spot green shirts amongst the sea of orange heading towards the stadium. The whole country was now fully behind the Ivorian team, who had changed their coach and twice come back from the dead. They were ready for our 3-5-2 formation, which had caught them by surprise last time.

The game was tough from the start – the momentum was with them. We were used to absorbing pressure and counter-attacking at speed, but Ivory Coast did well to contain our two biggest threats, Victor Osimhen and Ademola Lookman.

Against the run of play, we took the lead. From a corner, the ball looped up high and I attacked it as hard as I could. I spun in the air as I jumped, so I didn't actually see the ball go in. It was only when I landed, looked over my shoulder and heard my team-mates screaming that I realised I'd scored. After being so loud and vibrant, the crowd fell silent.

But Ivory Coast kept believing. Just after the hour mark, they scored from a corner. The stadium erupted. That goal changed everything. Even though we were still in the game, you could feel the life slowly drain out of us.

Sebastien Haller scored a fantastic winner. I was with him at the front post and thought I had the situation covered as the cross came in, but he stuck out his foot and managed to find the net. It was such a difficult finish. Looking back, I wish I'd attacked the space more, but those are the fine margins at the top level.

At full-time, a wave of emotions came over me. I wanted to cry. I was so proud of what we'd achieved, but so sad we couldn't get over the line. I remember seeing Haller on the pitch with his wife and kids. We all knew that he'd been through a life-or-death situation that was so much bigger than football. Maybe it was meant to be for him to win that final.

I was voted Player of the Tournament and received the award on the pitch. I would always swap that for winning AFCON, but it felt like a personal victory. I overcame a really difficult moment in my career and proved myself right.

It hurt watching the Ivorians celebrate as we walked past the trophy to collect our runners-up medals. I'll never forget that. We were so close."

Interview by Sean Cole

Nigeria 1-2 Ivory Coast
(Troost-Ekong 38) (Kessie 62, Haller 81)

Coach: Jose Peseiro — **Coach:** Emerse Fae

Nigeria: Nwabili; Bassey, Troost-Ekong, Ajayi, Aina; Iwobi (Yusuf 79), Onyeka (Aribo 86), Sanusi (Moffi 86); Lookman (Iheanacho 79), Osimhen, Chukwueze (Simon 56)

Ivory Coast: Y. Fofana; Kossounou, Ndicka, Konan; Aurier (Singo 70), Seri (Lazare 90+2), Kessie, S. Fofana (Sangare 88); Gradel (Diakite 70), Haller (Krasso 88), Adingra

Runner-up... a heartbroken Troost-Ekong with his silver medal

> "Reaching the AFCON final is the pinnacle of my career so far"

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